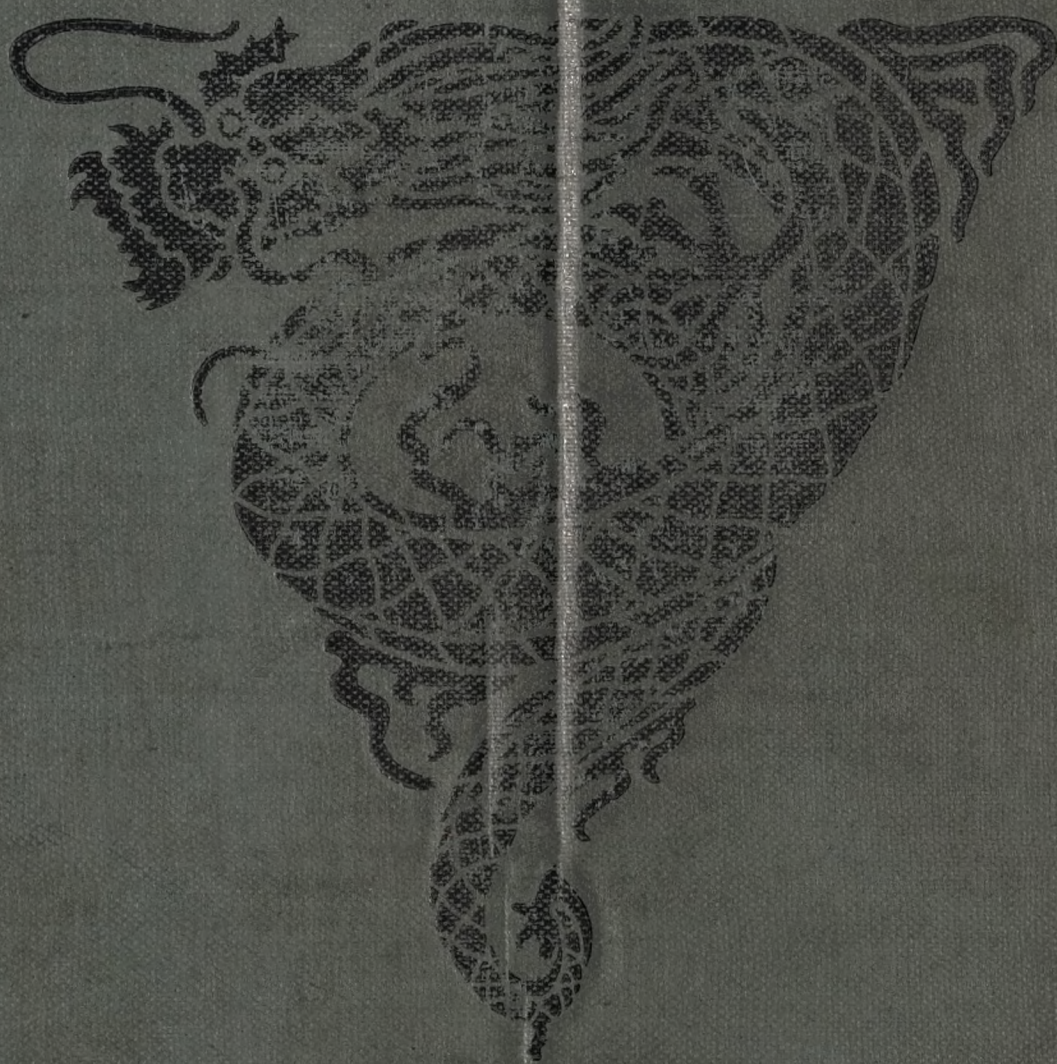


THE BREATH OF THE DRAGON

~ A · H · FITCH ~





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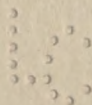


"She seemed to read in his small glittering eyes something fiendlike."

Drawn by Modest Stein.

The Breath of the Dragon

By
Original
A. H. Fitch
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To
THE MEMORY
OF
MY MOTHER

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The Breath of the Dragon

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CHAPTER I

AN ESCAPE AND A MEETING

THE house-boat drew near a large village and stopped. On the deck of the boat three people were leisurely taking afternoon tea. Before them stretched the silent, creeping Pei-ho, sinuous as a serpent, poisonous as its fangs.

Upon the opposite bank rose graves, hundreds upon hundreds of them, cone-shaped like potato-mounds on an Indiana farm. Overhead gleamed the blue bowl of the Eastern sky. The elderly gentleman, whose interest in afternoon tea was less than perfunctory, stared at the cone-shaped graves. "Don't think much of the view," he said to the girl by his side, and turned his chair to face the village. The next moment he was on his feet gazing intently on the scene before him. The girl put her cup down suddenly and stared also. A tall Chinese was racing through the village, at his heels a score or more of soldiers. Be-

fore they could seize him, he dashed into one of the huddled galleried houses lining the street. His pursuers battered violently upon the barred door. The Americans on the boat could hear the loud cracking of the wooden panels. A few minutes later they saw the entrance forced and the soldiers rush into the house.

Almost at the same moment a foreigner appeared from the rear of the dwelling and sauntered down the street toward the landing.

There was a sense of suppressed excitement in the girl's attitude which was shared by the man beside her.

"Mr. Day!" she exclaimed, "did you see him drop from the balcony behind that house?"

"Yes," he replied.

A babble of voices came echoing down the street. The soldiers ran from the house again, shouting angrily. They were joined by a crowd of villagers attracted to the scene by the uproar. The foreigner, apparently indifferent to the commotion behind him, continued his leisurely walk toward the landing. Betty Danford with difficulty controlled her excitement. "Why doesn't he hurry!" she exclaimed and moved by an irresistible impulse she called to him: "Run! Run!"

The young man glanced up. He saw a slender girl leaning over the boat railing, her pretty face, with anxiously parted lips, framed in a large rose-trimmed hat. Then he turned and scanned the street behind him.

The soldiers had separated into groups of four. Some were examining the neighbouring houses; others were racing down the street. One group was headed for the landing.

As the young man approached the boat he lifted his hat. "I beg pardon," he said, addressing Mr. Day. "May I ask if you have passed a house-boat floating our flag?" He pointed with a pleasant smile on his lean, brown face to the Stars and Stripes over the cabin roof. "My boat was to call for me here," he explained; "it has failed to turn up."

"We have not passed a house-boat," replied Mr. Day, throwing a swift comprehensive glance at the young man's attire. It was distinctly untidy. His appearance was that of a man who had dressed in extraordinary haste; his well-fitting coat was buttoned high to hide the absence of a vest; he was collarless; and his shoes though tied were not laced.

The soldiers had reached the rickety wooden pier. "Come aboard," said Mr. Day with sharp abruptness.

"Thank you," returned the young man politely; "I will wait here a few minutes," and he seated himself on the side of the pier.

The crew were squatting in the stern of the boat absorbed in gambling for their supper. When they heard the shouts of the soldiers speeding down the pier, they leaped to their feet to watch them curiously.

Betty Danford stood motionless beside her companions, her heart throbbing violently. She felt afraid for the young man. He however was bending down whittling a bit of wood unconcernedly. The soldiers passed him; to them he was only an uninteresting foreigner. They questioned the crew in loud shrill tones, and were answered indifferently. They scrutinized the face and appearance of each man. Not satisfied with this inspection, they determined to search the boat. The Chinese captain protested vigorously. Betty saw the young man on the pier suddenly stop whittling and half rise from his seat, then sink back again, his eyes, under his bent head, fixed with keen, alert look on the soldiers. The captain was pointing to the flag fluttering over the cabin. His voice was threatening and indignant; the crew endorsed his remarks vociferously. But when the soldiers pushed impudently past them the young man sprang up and vaulting the low railing confronted them on the deck. Mr. Day strode toward the soldiers. "Get out of this!" he said angrily. His gestures not his words were understood. One of the crew seized a huge oar to emphasize the command. It failed of its mark and descended with force on Mr. Day's raised arm, which fell limply to his side. Filled with consternation at what he unwittingly had done and fearing the wrath of the captain who shrieked imprecations at him, the man leaped into the river and with swift strokes made for the opposite

shore. Whereupon the soldiers became convinced that the fleeing man was the one they were seeking. They rushed back to the pier to procure a row-boat in which to pursue him.

The young man sprang to Mr. Day's side. "Is your arm badly hurt?" he asked.

"Broken," returned the older man laconically, while his wife and Betty hovered anxiously and helplessly about him. The young stranger, with a certain awkward skill, set the injured man's arm, applied splints procured from a wicker basket standing on deck, and bound it with strips of table-cloth Betty brought from the cabin. As he was occupied with this task, Mr. Day said abruptly, "Young man, it was you those soldiers were after."

The remark was received composedly by the stranger, nor did he attempt to deny the assertion. "It is lucky for me they were not as keen observers as you," he replied smiling quietly. Then he introduced himself. "My name is John Follingsbee. The soldiers you saw are encamped beyond the village. They are taking condemned prisoners to Tientsin for execution. I heard it rumoured that a—that someone for whom I had an important message was among the prisoners. I went to the camp, but was refused admittance and got in by strategy. Unfortunately I was detected coming out. The soldiers pursued me to the village where I eluded them by running into a friend's house, docking my Chinese clothes, and

escaping by the rear balcony while they were forcing an entrance." He spoke slowly as if giving careful thought to his words.

Betty's eyes shone. "Did you succeed in delivering the message?" she asked.

"Message?" he queried, then added quickly—"No—not yet." A reply which might have prompted further questionings had not Mr. Day swayed unsteadily forward. Follingsbee caught him and half led, half carried him to the cabin lounge where he soon dropped asleep, exhausted. His wife kept watch beside him.

Out on the deck Betty explained to Follingsbee, a little shyly, that she was the daughter of Mr. Danford, the newly appointed Minister to China. Her father had preceded her to the capital, leaving her to follow more leisurely with their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Day, who after visiting the legation intended returning home by way of Japan.

As they sat and talked together a house-boat rounded a bend; it was coming downstream toward them. "That's my boat!" exclaimed Follingsbee hailing it.

A note of regret was perceptible in his voice when, turning again to the girl, he said: "The parting of our ways has come. You and your friends go to Peking—I go to Tientsin."

But Betty's friends did not go to Peking. Mrs. Day, anxious that her husband should have medical attendance as soon as possible, determined to return to Tientsin and later sail for home. The

decision, though undoubtedly wise for the Days, was at best an awkward one for Betty. This was duly recognized by her troubled chaperone. It was Follingsbee who solved their difficulty. "There is a small mission station three miles inland on the opposite shore. It may be that the missionaries there will be glad of an opportunity to visit their confrères in Peking and will accompany Miss Danford. In that event my house-boat is of course entirely at Mr. Day's service," and he volunteered to walk to the station and interview the missionaries. His offer was gratefully accepted. The boats crossed the river and were tied to the bank. Follingsbee, with long, swinging strides went cross-country to the mission station. On his return he reported the successful result of his visit. The missionary and his wife had consented to accompany Betty and would arrive within an hour or two.

In the meanwhile the Days and their baggage were transferred to Follingsbee's boat, and the injured man made comfortable in his new cabin. When the missionaries arrived and Betty had bidden her friends good-bye, she turned to Follingsbee and said with sweet formality: "Whenever you come to Peking, father will be glad to see you."

It was an erroneous statement though she did not know it.

"And you?" he asked before he could check himself.

"Yes," she returned smiling. When Betty smiled two charming dimples appeared in her soft cheeks. Follingsbee was thinking of them as his boat sailed down the Pei-ho, a phantom ship in the white moonlight.

CHAPTER II

TRICKED

BETTY's boat remained tied to the bank that night. An old man had hastened after the missionaries with the information that two of their flock—the old man's son and grandson—had been dragged to prison. They were falsely accused of having assisted Fen-Sha, the young Chinese reformer under sentence of death in Tientsin, to organize in their village one of his many "Young China Clubs" whose purposes were the promulgation of progressive ideas obnoxious to the Imperial Government.

The old man besought the missionaries to delay their departure for another day and intervene with the District Magistrate in behalf of his sons. The plea could not be refused. The matter was explained to Betty. It was decided that the missionaries should leave the boat at daybreak and return before the sun was three hours high.

Betty was sleeping when they left. Her English-speaking *amah* was not. She watched the missionaries till they passed from sight. Then she sought the captain and informed him that her

young mistress commanded him to proceed immediately on their journey. The woman had her own reasons for wishing to avoid further delay. A fair breeze was blowing; the sails were set and the house-boat made good speed.

When Betty awakened from her slumbers late that morning, the boat was well on its way up the river. The *amah* did not wait for Betty to discover the absence of the missionaries, but told her, smiling blandly, that they had sent word they would be unable to accompany her to Peking as their presence, for the next five days, was necessary at the trial of their converts. And Betty, believing her, was as gay and trustful as if her father were waiting for her around the next bend of the river. The wind sank as the day advanced and the crew took to the great oars. They chanted the familiar refrain:

"Ay-ly-chy-ly
A-ha-a-ah."

Frequently the refrain was echoed from passing junks plying up and down the river. The Pei-ho represented the great highway connecting Tientsin with the capital, for the Peking railroad was as yet only a tentative suggestion.

While Betty watched her crew dextrously rowing with long clumsy oars, she suddenly became aware of a Chinese man and woman on the near bank. They were standing beside a cart. The man was waving his arms towards the boat and

shouting. The *amah* emerged quickly from the cabin and with a little squeal, meant to convey surprise, toddled to the railing. She also shouted something in shrill falsetto. Then she turned a long face to her young mistress. "Belongy two piecee cousin—hab ride chop-chop tellee me something plenty bad. More better my talkee boat-coolies not makee boat walk for likki (a little) time, till two piecee cousin talkee my" (talk with me).

The order was given and the *amah* hurried ashore. In a few minutes she returned accompanied by the young woman and explained volubly to Betty that her mother, who lived in the neighbourhood, was sick unto death and had sent for her and that her cousin, who was an excellent maid, had volunteered to travel to Peking in her place. Betty's protests were unavailing. The woman declared she must go to her mother. The new *amah* stepped forward and waited silently with downcast eyes. She was a girl of Betty's own age, very handsome and with a certain indefinable air which somehow did not accord with her humble attire or attitude. Betty had never seen a Chinese girl like this before; she felt attracted towards her and was relieved that this was so, for it was apparent that she had no choice but to take her. The matter being settled, the house-boat again sailed up the river. But Betty returned to the cabin and with crinkled brow stared out of the window. Was the *amah's* sudden departure a

trick? Had she deliberately planned to leave her in this manner? If so, what had been her object? She turned abruptly, determined to question the cousin. She saw her swiftly raise the maid's mattress, lying on the floor, and thrust under it a small bundle, which till now had not left her hands. The *amah* appeared for the fraction of a moment disconcerted. But Betty was too intent on her own thoughts to notice her confusion. She plied her with questions, receiving no more satisfactory reply than a gentle shake of the head. The new *amah* knew no English! To hide her consternation Betty returned to the deck and resumed her contemplation of the landscape. She gazed at the sordid little mud villages squatting on the muddy banks and the flat plains stretching off interminably, punctuated with countless graves. She shivered. An indefinable oppression seized her. She seemed suddenly terribly alone. She thought the furtive-eyed boatmen were looking queerly at her. With a gasp which was half a sob she realized that she was frightened.

It may be the *amah* divined something of her thoughts, for that night in the cabin she touched her gently on the arm and looked at her with an expression so kindly and reassuring, Betty felt her confidence return. A certain sympathetic understanding seemed to spring up between them and Betty found that although the new *amah* was ignorant of every duty pertaining to a maid, her

presence was a pleasure to her. The *amah* steadily refused to appear on deck, but in the cabin she did her utmost to entertain her mistress. Once she sang in a soft hushed voice:

“A tortoise I see on a lotus flower resting,
A bird mid the reeds and the rushes is resting;
A light skiff propelled by some boatman's fair
daughter,
Whose song dies away o'er the fast-flowing water.”

Betty could not understand the words but she liked the rippling melody of the song. She did not know that this strangely attractive maid of hers was singing a lyric written by the poet Li Po of the eighth century, unknown to any but the cultured few.

On the third day the aspect of the country changed; there were wide cultivated fields around thriving hamlets and groves of handsome trees sheltering the tombs of the rich. Finally they reached Tung-chow where canal-boats were substituted for the commodious river house-boats. The Grand Canal has four levels; at each level the traveller has to change boats, mules, and drivers. Betty's *amah* now developed a belated but valuable efficiency and this in spite of a toothache from which she appeared to be suffering, for she had swathed her face in bandages so large her features were barely discernible. She engaged the boats and superintended the removal of Betty's baggage. Her own small bundle she held carefully

clutched under her arm. A good-natured coolie attempted to take it. She turned upon him with blazing eyes and a peremptory command to be gone. At the fourth level when Betty had changed boats for the last stage of her journey and was watching the men transfer the baggage, which from this point was carried to Peking by carts, the *amah* threw a furtive glance around, then, unobserved, swiftly scooped up a handful of dust and dropped it in her handkerchief which she carefully tied and slipped into her bundle.

It was an hour later that she suddenly touched Betty's arm and in a low tense voice exclaimed: "Peking! Peking!" Betty looked. Before her loomed a dark mass, a sombre length of unbroken masonry. Nothing indicated the presence of a great city beyond. No domes, or minarets, no monuments or towers rose above the imprisoning wall, its gloomy aspect heightened by tall battlements guarding every gateway.

A wide stretch of desolate, sandy road followed the length of the wall.

Near the entrance of the great gates alone were tokens of the busy life of the hidden city; clumsy, blue-topped carts rumbled in and out; men with empty baskets slung on poles across their shoulders stepped briskly along, deftly dodging the hoofs of galloping ponies, whose riders proclaimed themselves Mongols by their high fur caps and reckless but magnificent horsemanship.

As the boat neared the city, Betty, with an

expectant smile, watched for the sight of a familiar figure, but the *amah* disappeared in the little cabin. When the boat was tied to the bank, Betty ran ashore.

She watched eagerly the approach of a sedan-chair, carried by two panting men; she thought she recognized the outline of her father's tall, slim figure behind the silk curtains; the bearers hurried past and a yellow-visaged Chinese peered out. Only then the thought flashed through her that the telegram might have been missent and that her father might not know of her arrival. Her daintiness shrank as she realized the necessity of riding in one of the dirty, shabby carts standing near. She eyed the garlic-reeking drivers with extreme disgust. "No doubt they are smallpox too," she shuddered, then turned to tell her *amah*, in the pantomime language they had come to know so well, to engage the services of the cleanest one. She was not in sight. Betty went hurriedly on board the boat again and looked in the cabin. It was empty. The coolies, squatting on the deck smoking, stared at her curiously. Betty suddenly felt a disinclination to linger there a moment longer and hastened ashore. A beggar-woman, with dust-covered, dishevelled hair and horrid rags, was hobbling off towards the gates. The minutes passed and still the *amah* did not come. Betty watched some boys on the opposite bank playing a curious game of shuttlecock with their feet. A child ran past her flying a kite made of a

live cricket fastened to the end of a string. The struggling little insect flopped against her cheek in its enforced flight. Betty started, and once more resumed her eager watch.

As the minutes lengthened to a quarter of an hour, then half an hour, and still no *amah* came, her confidence forsook her. Worn as she was with the travels of the day, and afflicted now with a sense of isolation, she had a struggle to keep back the tears. Unable to direct the cart-man as to her destination—even had she the courage to trust herself to him—she stood motionless, a sickening sense of impotence upon her. The day was declining. The whole western horizon was throwing forth flames of light, staining the white radiance of the clouds with crimson, gold, and purple.

Suddenly she became aware of an increased commotion near the gates. Everyone was hastening towards the city; even the child with the living kite, who had returned to stare at her, dropped his cricket and rushed away with all the speed of his little yellow legs. Then she remembered that the great gates of the Chinese capital were closed soon after sundown. She was dimly conscious that she too must hasten towards the city, if she did not wish to pass the night beyond the outer walls of Peking. Already the stream of ingoing carts and men had ceased. She ran swiftly down the sandy road and slipped through the ponderous doors as they closed behind her with an ominous clang.

Pressing closely against the side of the deep stone-paved archway, Betty waited in the semi-obscurity of the place to regain her breath and quiet the tumult of her throbbing thoughts. The wide thoroughfare before her presented a curious scene of noise and confusion. The centre of the street, raised some two feet above the sides, was thronged with men; they were trundling wheelbarrows and driving carts; they were astride of tiny donkeys, or swaying on the backs of gaunt, meek-eyed camels, laden with coal from Tartary; they were on rugged ponies and on stately mules, and all were threading their way through the crowded space with marvellous dexterity. On the sides of the street, pedlars were bawling out their wares—barbers were plying their trade or twanging a species of jew's-harp to attract customers,—beggars were beating their clap dishes before gaudily painted shops, where goods were still exposed for sale. There was laughing and wrangling among groups of idle men and fighting and snarling among mangy dogs.

Through this mixed multitude Betty knew she would never summon courage to pass. With a beating heart she left her hiding-place, hoping to find on the right or left of the archway a street less crowded than this broad avenue. She had no alternative but to wander forth in the forlorn hope of stumbling on a foreigner who would conduct her in safety to the legation. When she stepped from under the protecting arch, a ragged

urchin, yellow-faced and impish, noticing her frightened looks and shrewdly divining her lost condition, shouted with delighted malice, "*Quatsi, quatsi*" (foreign devil, foreign devil), and by his cries attracted other boys, who surrounded her, taking up the derisive yell. Several men, drawn by idle curiosity, joined the group. They were amazed to find the *quatsi* not a man, but a young woman, alone and on foot, and their voices soon swelled the shrill chorus of jeers.

Ere long a large crowd gathered about her. There was loud laughing and talking, scoffing and joking; a few men, boldly insolent, stooped to peer with leering eyes into her white face; others, with more curiosity than intended effrontery, examined her dress, her hat and gloves, for the clothing of a feminine *quatsi* excited their interest in proportion to the rarity of the opportunity afforded them for inspecting it.

Betty, pale with terror, looked wildly around for a passing Chinese of the upper class, who, seeing her thus harassed by the rude crowd, would, she thought, protect her. Two members of the literati—their classical calling indicated by large round spectacles—were driving by in handsome carts, their *mafoos*, or outriders, brandishing whips and shouting "*chichkuang nina*" (Lend me your eyes) as they cleared the road before them. Betty's pleading cry challenged the attention of the carts' occupants. Their aristocratic serenity was not disturbed by troublesome curiosity. With un-

disguised apathy—a forcible contrast to the lively interest displayed by the rabble about her—they passed on.

Fatigue and fright had now exhausted Betty; she sank half fainting against the stone facing of the archway. In this dazed state she failed to notice a man, tall, with a suggestion of muscular strength, push his way through the crowd. His deep round tones in expostulation rang out above the shrill falsetto of the other voices. A shrinking backward of those near her told of some sudden change.

She saw the tall Chinese hastening towards her, stopping only once to plant a vigorous blow on the dirty, shaven pate of a yelling priest of Buddha whose frightened squeals as he ducked to avoid another knock vastly amused the crowd. Betty watched the man approach with mingled feelings of fear and hope. Would he be friend or foe? But when she heard him say in perfect English: "Keep close behind me while I clear the road of these beggars; I have a cart here," her overwrought nerves like the tension of a too tightly drawn violin string gave way and hot tears of relief and weariness chased each other down her cheeks. He steered her safely through the crowd and with muscular arms lifted her bodily into the cart, then springing on the seat across the shafts, drove rapidly from the avenue into one of the numerous quiet side streets of the city, keeping the while an alert watch to the rear. Neither he nor Betty

had spoken. Now he turned to her. "You are quite safe from further annoyance, Miss Danford."

With the mention of her name, Betty flashed a quick look at him, then gave a sob of unutterable relief. "Mr. Follingsbee! Oh! I am so glad! So glad! How did you reach Peking? I didn't think to find you here!"

"You didn't find me—I found you. Priority of discovery entitles me to question you first."

Betty smiled through her tears as he intended she should.

Then he asked where her companions were and why she was alone and on foot in the streets of Peking. As Betty related the concatenation of circumstances which placed her at the mercy of a street rabble the first hour of her arrival in the capital, his face grew hard and his mouth shut grimly. When she concluded her story, he said: "That *amah* of yours deserved hanging. She lied about the message; the missionary—I know the type—would not have sent it. She also lied about her mother—it is usually the grandmother's funeral that serves the purpose. You say the second *amah* disappeared after you arrived?"

"Yes, and I feel so worried about her. What could have happened to her, Mr. Follingsbee?"

"Nothing; don't waste your sympathies on her, Miss Danford. She was no doubt a Pekingese woman and anxious to return here. You furnished her with an opportunity of so doing free of expense; she is now probably engaged in

explaining her tactics to an admiring home-circle."

"The wicked little heathen!" exclaimed the girl wrathfully. The next minute, however, she shook her head and said: "No, I cannot believe she would do that. She was so sweet, so altogether lovely to look upon," she added inconsequently.

"Did you see her leave the boat?"

"No, and there was not a woman in sight while I waited, except a horrid, dirty, beggar-woman."

Follingsbee gave a violent start. For a moment he did not speak, then he asked carelessly: "The *amah*—the one who disappeared I mean—knew English, of course?"

His face indicated nothing of the tenseness with which he waited for her reply.

"She didn't know a word of English. We used the pantomime language. You have no idea how graceful and clever she was."

"We're going into another rut. Watch out!" he warned as the cart gave a violent lurch sideways, then righted itself with a jerk. "Good! you will soon learn to balance yourself in these fifteenth-century vehicles. You said the beggar-woman was young?"

Betty stared in perplexed surprise. "Beggar? What beggar?"

"The one you saw after leaving the boat."

"Oh! that woman, I don't know whether she was young or centuries old. I wasn't interested in her, I was too miserable myself."

"Of course," he said gently, and let his dark eyes rest a moment upon her pretty face—it had a drawn, tired look from the ordeal she had been through. "You will soon be home now. That gate is the Ha-ta-man it leads into the Tartar city where the legations are."

"How strange it all seems! Are you sure you are not Kublai Khan and this isn't the thirteenth century, and I really am Betty Danford of Siquaw, Illinois?"

"I can satisfy you on the first point; the second I never feel quite sure of myself; the third I am more than half inclined to believe is a dream. I am not Kublai Khan and to prove it we will shake hands. Kublai Khan never did that you know."

He gravely extended his hand and Betty, dimpling, let her own rest a fleeting instant within it.

"You haven't told me yet how you got to Peking before I did," she reminded him.

"An hour after I reached Tientsin with your friends—who by the way were just in time to catch the Japan steamer—I received news which compelled me to return immediately to Peking. I was lucky enough to fall in with the Customs mail-carrier—a Chinese friend of mine—and rode with him. The mail travels overland from Tientsin. The land route, though it is much worse than the river route, is also much shorter."

"Do you always dress like—a—like that in Peking?" she asked.

"Not always," he said smiling, "and never

when I expect to meet young ladies from Sipuaw, Illinois."

Mr. Danford was both amazed and delighted to see his daughter. As he had supposed her in the safe custody of the Days, the absence of specific news of their arrival—the telegram reached him the following day, the Chinese operator having missent it—had caused him no uneasiness.

Being a gentleman, and in the present instance a grateful one, he thanked Follingsbee warmly, though he would rather have thanked any other man in Peking for the same service rendered.

He had heard rumours of his young compatriot's mode of life which he did not like. Follingsbee's Chinese costume did not help to make him forget these rumours. The young American disappeared periodically without leaving any clue to his whereabouts. It was known, however, that he lived among the lower-class natives and as one of them.

When a man persists in doing a thing of this kind he soon finds himself, if not exactly shunned by his acquaintances, at least never sought, and in the end the result is apt to be the same, namely, social isolation. To this fact Follingsbee was apparently totally indifferent, for he continued to disappear whenever he so desired and to reappear with perfect composure whenever he was ready.

When Follingsbee returned to his room that night, he drew from his pocket a crumpled letter, and spread it out on the table. He read the Chinese characters twice over, and replacing the letter

in his pocket, lighted his pipe. He smoked in profound meditation for half an hour. Then he knocked the ashes from his pipe, and said to himself: "Of course it was A-lu-te. But how the deuce am I to find her among all the beggars of Peking."

CHAPTER III

SOME GOSSIP AND A DINNER

AT the Peking Club, the young men of the legations and Customs were freely discussing the arrival of Miss Betty Danford in their midst. The subject was not a new one, but their interest in it still continued fresh.

"They say," said a Fourth Assistant B. in the Customs, "she is a ripping little filly and steps beautifully over the traces."

"Wonder if those tommy-rot stories about her are true?" inquired an aspiring young diplomat.

"When will this interesting young creature appear? Anyone know?" asked a Customs man.

"Tonight at Lady Caton's dinner and dance," drawled a sleepy-looking young Englishman. "Saw her Ladyship's chit-book yesterday."

"Then I'll take my first view of her when she is in her war paint."

"Like a—what do you call it?—jolly little squaw," added a youthful Frenchman.

"Boy!" yelled Captain Bertram, who, ensconced in a corner, had been glancing over the latest London *Times*, already a month old. "Bring me a

whiskey peg." Then turning to the young men: "The eloquence of you youngsters makes my throat dry," he said throwing down the paper. "I will mention for your edification that I have seen Miss Danford and that she is a young girl of breeding and refinement and won't please you, as she is quite without any of your own amiable vulgarity."

Whereupon the Captain rose leisurely and strolled from the room.

He was the First Secretary of the British Legation.

"Bully for old Bertie! He always fires a shot for the ladies when it's needed," chuckled the Fourth Assistant B.

"Going to the Princess's again I'll lay a guinea," said the sleepy-looking Englishman, more animation in his voice than before, as he watched Bertram pass down the street.

"Ah! there's that man Follingsbee back and in civilized garb," he announced disgustedly.

"Ugh—hope he isn't coming in here," said the Fourth Assistant B. "Who put him up anyway," he inquired.

"The I. G. (Inspector General), my boy. He dotes on him; says there isn't a dialect in all China that man doesn't know or can't learn to speak like a native inside of two weeks."

"Humph! Just the same I wouldn't care to introduce him to my sister if she were out here."

"Quite so. A decent chap doesn't associate

with Chinamen—the coolie sort—in the way he does.”

“Speaking of natives, have you heard that the reformer Fen-Sha is in prison in Tientsin, condemned to death by the slicing process?” asked the young Frenchman.

“Yes. Beastly country this, where a man can be hacked to pieces by order of the court. They say Fen-Sha is a fine young chap too—a genuine patriot and all that.”

“He was educated in America, wasn’t he?”

“Believe so.”

The conversation gradually reverted to the absorbing topic of Miss Betty Danford’s arrival. Young ladies were scarce in Peking and the advent of a pretty girl who was also hostess of the American Legation was a subject of unabating interest.

When Betty appeared that night on her father’s arm in Lady Caton’s drawing-room, the Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps was heard to declare solemnly that her entry took his breath away. As he was a gallant and kindly old gentleman, he repeated the remark in a toast which he offered to Betty and which was drunk with enthusiasm by the young men and with politely disguised indifference by the ladies, while Betty blushed and looked prettier than ever. But this was later in the evening.

When all the dinner-guests had arrived, Lady Caton led the way into the great dining-room.

There were sixteen people at the table. The

conversation was principally in French. There was a saucy refinement of levity tripping from rosy lips and gay laughter. Many of the women were pretty; one was beautiful—the wife of the Minister from Spain. Her statuesque beauty was heightened by a gown of black velvet, from which her shoulders rose cool and white like glistening marble. Her husband, many years her senior, threw proud glances of approbation at her from his seat across the table.

“Our Spanish friend grows handsomer every day,” said Princess Pontioff to her neighbour, “but the little lady of the American Legation has a prettiness I like better,” and the fair Russian let her violet eyes rest in frank admiration on Betty. She never feared to draw attention to a woman better-looking than herself. “I have attractions which lie deeper than my skin,” she had declared once long ago.

From the other end of the table came the French Minister’s rasping voice: “Vous n’y êtes pas. Il faut donc, à la fin, vous le dire. Quand je trouve un livre assez bête pour être bon ou assez bon pour être bête, je me dis tranquillement voici un livre pour ma femme.” The Minister was not married. His sally provoked a laugh.

“What does he say?” asked Betty, dimpling, but anxious to learn why she was joining in the merriment. Youth and happiness echo a laugh as instinctively as they draw breath. “Not worth repeating, ’pon honour,” said Captain Ber-

tram. "I was awfully lucky to have you for a neighbour," he continued. "It is my fate frequently to take Madame Imati in to dinner and she can't speak a word of any language except Japanese. She is an awfully good sort, but not quite the companion one might desire for a dinner of two and three hours' duration."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Betty, "do you mean to tell me we have to eat as long as that?"

Bertram laughed. She had glanced up at him as she spoke, now her eyes were lowered again on her plate.

"You have the prettiest eyelashes and the sweetest little mouth in the world," he was saying to himself. Aloud he said: "Try one of these pâtés, you will find them very good."

Betty did not answer. She had suddenly become conscious, with something of surprise and pride, of the facile manner in which her recluse father adapted himself to frothy conversation. She had not learned that a good-natured contempt for the average intellect is as efficient a teacher in the art of self-possession as a long course of social training.

"You Americans are so complex," Lady Caton was saying to him.

"And why not?" returned the Minister smiling. "It requires the joint efforts of most of the nations of the civilized world to produce one of us."

"I shall begin a study of this American complex

character as exemplified in a certain Mr. Follingsbee," cried Princess Pontioff gaily. "Is he typical, Mr. Danford?" she asked, animated by a pure spirit of mischief. The Prince frowned frankly. Lady Caton looked embarrassed, even annoyed. She shot a swift glance at Mr. Danford, who replied coldly: "Not in the least, Princess." "What a pity," she continued with perfect composure, "I like him. He can laugh at the most imperceptible wit, tell a story with some grace, and listen to a badly told one with still more. That last is an accomplishment usually restricted to my sex," she added, making a little face.

The German Chargé d'Affaires informed his neighbour that this Mr. Follingsbee was too intimate with pig-tailed natives to be tolerated in polite society. "What is he doing in Peking?" inquired the neighbour, who was a newcomer.

"Exactly! What is he doing here! He says he is preparing to travel into Tibet. I for one do not believe him. Does a man prepare for that journey by frequenting tea-houses all hours of the day and night, hobnobbing with dirty natives? I ask myself why, *um Gottes willen*, does a white man want to consort with Chinese when he is neither a diplomat, or worse yet, a missionary."

After dinner more guests arrived. The drawing-room soon filled with people. Magnificent toilets, scintillating diamonds, made a profusion of splendour, toned down to rich softness by the friendly light of wax candles.

In the ballroom someone was playing the piano. It was only when the Inspector-General entertained that diplomatic society in Peking danced to the music of a band trained by a musician in the employ of the great man.

The men outnumbered the women. They resembled black beetles circling about shimmering butterflies. Lady Caton moved among her guests with a hostess's smile and a gracious word for everyone. Betty was surrounded by half a dozen young men, each striving for a dance. It was Captain Bertram who claimed her for the first waltz. Princess Pontioff raised her eyebrows and smiled as she watched them for an instant.

"I wonder," she said to the German Chargé d'Affaires, "I wonder if our little friend over there will marry you or Captain Bertram. Of course, she will marry one of you—you are the only really eligible young men in Peking."

"It is of the charming American young lady you are speaking, yes?" returned the German, and raising his hands deprecatingly, added: "It is my misfortune that I am not eligible for the honour. I am subject to fits. I have been incarcerated in an insane asylum, I have been hanged for murder, I am——"

"An incorrigible," laughed the Princess. "Well then, since you withdraw from the arena——"

"Never having entered," he reminded her.

"Captain Bertram," she concluded her sentence, "will be without a rival."

"Like the great Pompey," he said, twirling his flaxen mustache.

"Why?" enquired the Princess.

"A lover of himself without a rival," replied the German suavely.

The two young diplomats disliked each other cordially and politely. This was due, among other reasons, to their widely different conception of humour. It is impossible to be friends with a man with whom you cannot laugh.

"Will you not dance now? It is my favourite waltz," he murmured.

"Really? It is not mine," remarked the Princess coolly. Then she glided off with him.

Lady Caton spun daintily around in the arms of the French Minister. She was holding up the train of her gown, displaying two small satin-clad feet chasing each other over the floor. His Reverence, the resident Bishop, in Apostolic knickerbockers, watched the race with a smile.

Mr. Danford retreated to the smoking-room where he was joined by Sir Arthur Caton and the Spanish Minister. The ball continued till far into the night.

CHAPTER IV

THE BEGGAR WOMAN

BETTY had been in Peking a week. During that time she had danced every night. She had gone to garden parties and had picnicked in picturesque Buddhist temples beyond the city. It may almost be said that foreign society in Peking fêted the presiding lady of the American Legation every hour of the day and most hours of the night. Betty had never enjoyed herself so continuously, in all her young life. She had seen Follingsbee frequently, but only for a few moments at a time. He did not attend the dinners or the dances, to which indeed he was not asked, nor did he join in the other gaieties. Betty sometimes found herself singularly annoyed at this without knowing why.

One morning after a ball she rose early in spite of the fatigue incident to long hours of dancing and prepared for a ride. When she stepped into the cool, fresh air, the garden coolies hastily unwound their queues—coiled for convenience round their heads, but never worn so in the presence of a superior—and respectfully saluted her.

At a window in the secretary's house a small white figure appeared.

It was Tommy, the five-year-old son of the first secretary.

"Thay, are you going widing?" he called to Betty.

"Yes. See, here comes the *Mafoo* with the ponies," she answered.

"If you wait till I get into my twouthers, I'll come too," he proclaimed grandly.

"Not this morning, Tommy," she said, and waving her riding whip to the disappointed little fellow she passed out of the gates.

Legation Street was never crowded, but this morning it was deserted except for a beggar crouching close to the wall. Betty threw her a few copper cash. The beggar brushed her unkempt, matted hair from her face with a quick, sly gesture and gazed after the American girl. Some impulse moved Betty at the same moment to look back. The beggar's eyes were fastened upon her. For the fraction of a second the two stared at each other. Then the woman stooped hurriedly, picked up the coppers, and disappeared down a side street.

"It is extraordinary!" murmured Betty. "Of whom does she remind me?"

For a while she puzzled over this strange and illusive resemblance of a dirty Pekingese beggar to someone she knew. Then she forgot the incident as she entered the crowded, evil-smelling streets

of the Chinese city to reach the great gates in the outer wall.

Once outside this wall, she urged her pony to a quicker pace, the *mafoo* close behind her, his long queue hanging, a straight, immovable line down his back.

There are few physical pleasures more acute than a brisk run on horseback in the cool of a pleasant day. The mind lies fallow, every mental phase is stilled in the exultant sense of pure animal well-being. On a green slope by the river, Betty sprang from her panting pony and threw herself upon the grass. When the first keen pleasure of her ride was passed, she reflected, with the girlish enthusiasm of eighteen summers, on the life she was to lead in Peking. It would be a steady whirl of gaieties. Even the prospect of long, tedious diplomatic dinners where she, as the Minister's daughter, would be the only young girl present, became bearable because of the dancing which would follow. She had scored what a budding *débutante* considers distinct success; her dances were divided and subdivided and her partners many. Betty sighed with content. Yet she was conscious of having missed Follingsbee. He had called once. She had received him with frank cordiality, her father with courteous but pronounced formality. Follingsbee had not repeated his visit.

"Good-morning!"

The girl started, and turning saw him looking

down upon her from his horse. He was not in Chinese costume. He swung himself from the saddle and sank on the ground beside her.

The *mafoo* led his horse a short distance away where Betty's pony and his own were contentedly grazing.

"If I were you I wouldn't ride alone around here. You must remember you are not in Siquaw, Illinois, but in Peking, China."

"Praise be!" said Betty blithely and added: "But father said that Foo-ling—he's my *mafoo* you know—was a very reliable man. He has been a trusted servant in the Legation for years."

"Nevertheless I want you to promise me not to ride alone again," insisted Follingsbee.

"To please you, never again while there's a man left in Peking. I'll ride with a gallant escort of three tomorrow, I promise you," she rejoined, a little smile of girlish triumph puckering the corners of her soft lips. Something in her joyous loveliness arrested his attention and moved him to say: "Do you find the life of diplomatic Peking very entertaining?"

Betty beamed happily upon him. "I am having the most wonderful time! Certainly the dinners are not very amusing, but the balls—they are such fun! I dance and dance until I am ready to drop and then I dance some more. And the next night—or the one after—I do it all over again!"

"You call that having a good time? Great Scott! I should hate it!" ejaculated Follingsbee.

"Is that the reason you don't come to the balls?" she asked abruptly.

"I can't say that," he said, tossing a pebble in the sluggish stream. "You see, I am not asked."

"Why are you not asked?" she demanded. The young man shrugged his shoulders: "Perhaps they don't like me," he answered carelessly.

"That is absurd," declared Betty promptly.

"Thank you. Nothing half so nice has ever been said to me," returned Follingsbee laughing.

"I don't understand it at all," she continued with a puzzled frown, "but I shall find out. It is useless asking father, he won't know, but Lady Caton will."

"Why bother your pretty head about so unimportant a matter? If I am not invited, I am also spared the trouble of writing regrets. By the way, if you chance to hear that my Chinese associates are too low class to be reputable, just bear in mind, will you, that I am in Peking for a special purpose and to further it I seek information and help wherever I can obtain them. I have even," he added, smiling a little as though amused at some thought, "not scorned to ask questions of beggars."

"Beggars!" exclaimed Betty, "what can they possibly know that could be of use to you?"

"A lot of things. For instance, some of them have travelled to Peking—the Mecca of Chinese mendicants—from distant places and therefore are acquainted with the character of the roads over which they have passed, the number of villages

on their way, and so forth. If they happen to have come from the south-west—in the direction of Tibet, you understand, where I hope to go—they——” He stopped abruptly. He seemed annoyed with himself, an acute observer might even have detected a certain compunction in his expression, as of one who had deliberately told an untruth and regretted having done so. Betty, however, was not an acute observer; moreover her thoughts had reverted to the beggar she had encountered in Legation Street that morning, and to the strange resemblance which had vaguely troubled her.

“Ah! Now I know!” she cried suddenly.

“Know what?” asked Follingsbee quickly.

“Of whom she reminded me.”

“May I ask you to be just a little more explicit?” he said with a look of relief. He stretched himself lazily on the ground, his hands clasped under his head.

“This morning when I left the Legation I saw a beggar woman crouching close to the wall. The *mafoo* said she had been hanging about the gates for the past week and the *tingi*¹ had repeatedly chased her away.” She stopped to stare at Follingsbee. He had pulled himself up with a quick jerk.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Nothing—go on,” he replied.

“I gave her a few cash as I passed. For some

¹ Gate-keeper.

reason I turned and looked back at her. She had brushed her long straggling hair from her face and was gazing after me. Something about her eyes seemed curiously familiar. This bothered me, for it was quite impossible that I should know anyone who even remotely resembled that poor wretched creature. But now I understand—she had eyes like my lovely *amah*—the one you know who disappeared so strangely the evening of my arrival in Peking. Do you think, Mr. Follingsbee," she asked anxiously, "she could possibly be——"

"Queer ducks, these Chinese," Follingsbee interrupted her. "They all look alike till you get to know them well."

He drew his watch out, glanced at it and exclaimed: "I almost forgot an important engagement due in half an hour. *Mafoo!* Miss Danford's pony!"

Before she realized it, Betty was mounted and riding toward Peking in hot haste, Follingsbee's horse setting the pace. When they passed through the gates of the Chinese city and slowed their animals to a quiet trot, Betty turned gaily to her companion. "That was a splendid run! But it just occurs to me that you brought me back almost by main force and without so much as a 'by your leave, fair lady.' Wasn't it a very high-handed proceeding, Mr. Follingsbee?" He was staring to the right and left with a quick, keen look in his eyes. He scarcely heard Betty's speech and answered it not at all.

She bit her lips; she felt chagrined. His pre-occupied air, his indifference contrasted markedly with the attention bestowed upon her by the young men of the legations. She determined not to speak again during the remainder of their ride.

In silence they traversed the crowded Chinese city and in silence entered the Tartar city. Follingsbee appeared indeed to be unconscious of the presence of his companion. Presently they reached Legation Street. In an alley close to the Russian Legation, and from where the gates of the American Legation could be seen, squatted a beggar, her clap-bowl beside her. When Betty saw her she broke her self-imposed silence. "There she is again!" she cried impulsively and turned toward the alley. Follingsbee's abstraction suddenly vanished. He seized Betty's bridle. "Don't go near her—she has smallpox!" he said sharply. His peremptory manner following his former complete indifference to her presence, irritated the girl to the point of anger.

"Let go my bridle, Mr. Follingsbee."

"Not if you intend to approach that woman. She has smallpox," he reiterated.

"She didn't have it two hours ago; it is not likely she has it now," retorted Betty with frank incredulity.

"It is not the same beggar——"

"I will find that out for myself, then."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said Follings-

bee, firmly. "I can't permit you to expose yourself to smallpox merely to satisfy your curiosity."

Betty's cheeks burned; her eyes flashed with the intensity of her exasperated feelings. She looked at the hand holding her bridle. Then almost involuntarily she half raised her riding-crop.

Follingsbee saw the motion. "Don't be silly, and don't make a scene before the *mafoo*," he said in a low voice. "You are behaving like a spoilt child. You ought to be ashamed!"

Betty stiffened in her saddle. She seemed suddenly to have grown older.

"If you will remove your hand from my bridle, Mr. Follingsbee, I promise to go home. You saved me from a Chinese mob once—in return I concede your present wishes and accept your insults. We are quits I think."

With that she rode rapidly toward the American Legation. Follingsbee experienced a new sensation which he only half understood. He watched her slender figure—the well poised head, the dainty boot just visible beneath the folds of her riding habit—disappear through the Legation gates.

Then he turned and entered the alley. At the same time from the opposite end of the alley appeared a half-score of Chinese soldiers, loud-blustering Bannermen. Follingsbee spurred his horse toward the beggar and leaning quickly from his saddle said in a low voice: "Hong-Kong."

"Tientsin," she whispered.

At last the answer! He had sought it vainly

among fifty or more wretched women mendicants during the past week.

The soldiers marching two by two drew nearer. Follingsbee spoke again hurriedly and threw some cash at her feet. In drawing the money from his pocket, his handkerchief fell out. The beggar whined her thanks in shrill tones, picked up the coppers, and hastily thrust into her bosom the purse which lay concealed in the cambric folds. Then she hobbled off trying to avoid the soldiers, who as they approached flung out unsavoury jests about beggars in general and women beggars in particular.

The handkerchief lay where it had fallen. Follingsbee appeared suddenly to notice it. He wheeled his horse about so the animal formed not only a barrier between the woman and the soldiers but effectually obstructed the latter's advance in the narrow alley. He leaned with slow deliberation from his saddle, picked up his property, and without shaking out the dust and the dirt thrust it back into his pocket.

In the handkerchief lay a crumpled piece of paper.

The soldiers muttered curses at the foreign devil's impudence in blocking their path. The young man affected not to hear or understand.

The beggar had disappeared.

Follingsbee passed the American Legation without stopping. He rode rapidly to his own quarters from which he emerged an hour later, dressed like a cartman.

CHAPTER V .

A TRANSFORMATION

THE beggar woman in the meanwhile made her way speedily, though cautiously, through the city streets, choosing by preference those which were deserted or with but few wayfarers. She slipped past lean pariah dogs snarling over refuse and hugged the walls in narrow lanes when over-laden mules went by, their riders with bland composure surmounting the burdens.

To escape a camel with paniers protruding like great excrescences from its sides, she turned into an adjoining street, wider than the ones she had been traversing. Here a crowd had collected to gape up at a woman standing on the flat roof of a house shrieking imprecations against her mother-in-law and taking the public into her confidence by recounting the miseries and abuse she had endured since she entered the house.

Unnoticed the beggar passed through the gaping crowd and emerged into the great market of Peking, the largest perhaps in the world, and certainly the noisiest. The staccato shrieks of buyers bargaining, the rumbling of carts, the

squeaking of wheelbarrows with small sails set to waft the curious landcraft along, the squealing of pigs being slaughtered, the dramatic shouts of professional story-tellers, all mingled together like the roar of waves in a stormy sea.

One side of the market was given over to the sellers of bamboo shoots and vegetables and of live fish in tubs of water. On the opposite side, were the meat and game stalls where fresh venison and beautiful long-tailed pheasants were displayed. Here also were the famous Peking ducks and the luscious fruits of North China, grapes, pears, and persimmons. Tables of fortune-tellers were set up everywhere and booths of geomancers. Enterprising chemists had erected shops in the great market for the sale of medicines: pills of dried, red-spotted lizard skins, fresh tops of stag-horn, and the celebrated Manchurian ginseng, resembling, with its colour of transparent white or pale yellow, pieces of stalactite, yet in cost beyond the purchase power of any save the wealthy, for the ginseng properties were thought to be life-giving, and rich old men and decrepit roués paid willingly thousand of taels for a pound of the root.

Not far from the chemist's stalls a juggler had collected a laughing crowd of men and boys, by coarse jokes and clever tricks. As the beggar woman passed he swallowed a bell large as a walnut. It bulged from his throat and rattled down into his stomach. The fellow danced to the tinkling of the bell which could be plainly heard inside him.

The woman hurried on with lowered eyes to hide the disdain and disgust shining in them. She passed a professional letter writer taking down the platitudes a young man was dictating to send to his father in a distant village. The young man was undisturbed by the noise in the market, or by the presence of the idly curious listening to his dictation, or by those who, rollicking past, delayed an instant to throw out mocking suggestions to the scribe.

"Tell him his son lay drunk all night with *saki*."

"Tell him he pawned his mother's amulet for a whiff of Fan-ling's opium."

The beggar woman hastened through the market, traversed street after street, till she entered a narrow alley and stopped before the door of a house. In high nasal tones she besought alms from the charitable ones within.

The door opened on a crack.

"Is it you, my flower?" said a low voice.

"It is I," replied the beggar.

The house, though of mean aspect, was clean and orderly within. The old woman who had opened the door closed it cautiously again and seizing the beggar's hands peered anxiously into her face.

"Did you find him?" she asked.

"I found him," replied the beggar wearily, sinking on the K'ang.

"And the money?" continued the other eagerly, "did he give it to you?"

"Yes, it is here." She drew the well-filled purse from her bosom.

The old woman emptied the contents on the K'ang, and began to count the money. "Tael two hundred!" she exclaimed; "for a foreign devil he did well!"

"You know I do not wish you to speak in that manner," said the beggar in an imperious voice.

"I forgot my little flower, my sweet one. And now I will wash the brown from your face, and take away those filthy rags. May you never again be forced to wear them."

She brought a basin of water, a cake of soap, and a towel and began her task, talking all the while.

"Oh, my flower, I am filled with foreboding. Did I not hear the cock crow at the hour of the ox? And yesterday I tripped against the oil can, upsetting it; and my left eye twitched three times at the hour of the snake. No good can come from such things. Misfortune is hovering near. I tremble with fear for you."

She washed the brown stain from the beggar's face, while she wailed forth her fears, and unwound the cotton rags fastened about the tender feet. They were cracked and blistered. She brought soothing lotions and carefully bathed them. Then she cleaned and combed the matted hair, and deftly twisted up the dark long strands on top of the shapely head. Finally she replaced the

wretched rags with a clean blue cotton gown and fastened an amulet around the slender throat.

"It is Hsi," she said, "I got it this morning from a fung-shui Sien-Sang" (a wind and water doctor). She stepped back and surveyed her work with satisfaction.

"There, my honey-bird! Who would take you now for the beggar-girl who just entered my door? Repose on the K'ang while I make tea."

"In truth I am in need of rest," said the erstwhile beggar with a sigh. With the removal of the rags and the stains from her face, she showed herself to be the same handsome young woman who had accompanied Betty Danford to Peking in the capacity of maid.

The old woman made tea over the brazier and brought the fragrant beverage in a bowl to her young mistress. She drank gratefully and sinking back on the K'ang rested her head on the wooden pillow.

"*Amah*," she said, "take the money and get the clothes you ordered to be ready today. Hurry, the time is growing short."

The woman flung herself on her knees beside the K'ang and clasped the girl's hands.

"Oh, my honey-bird, my heart's delight, I tremble for you. See, I am an old woman, bowed with many sorrows, and my eyes are as a well gone dry from overmuch weeping. Give up this thing. It is a wild plan and can lead to nought but your destruction. Moreover the Lady Yin will surely

have heard from her sister and will know that you are not her niece Wangti."

"That is improbable," returned A-lu-te; "the cousin of Fen-Sha,"—she spoke the name with lingering tenderness—"has just come from Pao-chou. He knows all about the family. The girl Wangti has been dead two years. Her mother and the Lady Yin have not been on speaking terms these five years or more. She knows nothing about her niece. Have no fear."

"But later when you leave there to go to——"

"Be silent," said A-lu-te peremptorily.

She pushed the *amah* gently from her. "Do as I bid you. Time flies and I must hurry, or I will be too late."

With a sigh the old woman rose, took the purse and left the house.

A-lu-te lay without moving, her eyes staring up at the ceiling.

In half an hour the *amah* returned carrying a large bundle wrapped in dark blue cotton cloth. She untied the cloth and displayed two gowns, one of them beautifully embroidered, also shoes embroidered in the same pattern and handsome hair ornaments and nail-shields.

A-lu-te examined the articles critically. She experienced nothing of that pleasure instinctive to a young girl when contemplating pretty new garments which are hers to wear.

"They are lovely, are they not, my lotus flower? See this silk, how firm yet soft! the

embroidery, how fine! What colour! What delicate design! *Ai, ai*, but you will look beautiful in these garments."

The next moment she broke out wailing again, wringing her knotted old hands in despair. "What good are such things to you, my lotus-bud! You were safer in your beggar's rags than you will be decked out in these fine clothes. They will kill you, my bird, they will kill you!"

A-lu-te gave no heed to this moaning.

"What money have you left, *amah*?" she asked.

The woman poured the silver on the K'ang. A-lu-te counted the pieces, then made of them two piles, one of which she gave to her *amah*.

"Take this and buy with it your coffin. At the coffin shop of Ta-Ping outside the Chien Men gate is an excellent one of fine wood and once lacquered. Get it. You have your passing away clothes. Your cock-crow pillow you can buy with what money remains after you have paid for the coffin."

The old woman was delighted; she poured forth her gratitude and for the nonce forgot to wail or prophesy evil. This was as A-lu-te wished. She rose now from the K'ang, slipped off the simple cotton gown she was wearing, and with the *amah*'s assistance began her toilet. Before long she stood arrayed as a Manchu lady of high quality, even to the long silver nail shields on the third and fourth fingers of her little hands.

"See if a cart is waiting," she commanded.

The woman opened the door and peered out.

In the alley, a short distance from the house, stood a mule-cart. The driver's head was bobbing in sleep as he sat on the shafts of the clumsy vehicle. Except for his presence, the alley was deserted.

"It is there," said the *amah*, and began again to sob. A-lu-te threw her arms around the old woman's neck. "Courage, *amah*! See, I go forth unafraid. 'As the winds and clouds of heaven are ever shifting, so the misery and happiness of men change from morning to evening.' Because I am unhappy now is not a sign that I shall not be joyful before another moon."

"*Ai*—perhaps—if you live that long," murmured the woman. A-lu-te made no response. Cautiously, swiftly, she slipped from the house and entered the cart.

The driver, suddenly wide-awake, whipped up his mule and the cart rattled off.

Behind the gauze curtains A-lu-te gave directions in a low voice. The driver nodded, without replying.

High in the air circled white doves—mid-sky hours, the Chinese call them—shedding, as they flew, soft æolian notes from the whistles fastened to their tail-feathers. A-lu-te loved their music; it recalled certain happy hours spent in a pleasant garden, with one she loved. She drew aside the curtains to look up at the doves. A shaven-headed bonze, collecting bits of printed paper in the street lest the sacred name of Buddha be

defiled, saw her. He gaped at the lovely face so suddenly exposed to him and made a coarse remark. The girl dropped the curtain hastily and sank back on the floor of the cart. The driver managed, while flicking his mule with his long whip, to include the bald pate of the bonze. The man of Buddha screamed out imprecations. The cart rattled on. It turned into a crowded thoroughfare, turned again, and a few minutes later stopped before a gate in a high stone wall.

The driver sprang from his seat and knocked vigorously on the wooden panels. A *tingi* (gate-keeper), in official hat and dress, opened the gate.

A-lu-te spoke from the interior of the cart:

"I am the niece of the Lady Yin. The driver is a mute. Give me entrance and have my presence announced."

The *tingi* flung the gate wide.

A-lu-te stepped from the cart and entered the court. The driver turned his mule about and disappeared quickly down the street.

"Is that a way for the Lady Yin's niece to present herself!" muttered the *tingi*, amazed at so unceremonious an arrival. He sounded a gong. A tall eunuch appeared. To him A-lu-te addressed herself in the same imperious manner:

"Announce to the Lady Yin that her niece, the daughter of Lord Cheng-shi, has arrived and begs to be admitted to her presence."

The beauty and haughty bearing of the Manchu girl impressed the eunuch. He bowed low, then

presented his arm to assist her as if she had been a bound-footed woman. He escorted her into a handsome reception room where he left her. A-lu-te seated herself on a carved teakwood chair and waited. The imperiousness was gone from her manner; her expression was anxious to the point of fear. But when the eunuch reappeared, she was again the haughty niece of Lady Yin.

A few minutes later A-lu-te stood in the presence of the wife of one of the most prominent Manchu officials in the capital. She advanced into the room a few steps, then courtesied, her left knee touching the floor.

"How is it that my brother-in-law did not notify me of your approaching arrival?" demanded Lady Yin sharply.

She was performing her toilet. Servants were removing wash-basins, soaps, perfumes, and towels, while others were arranging her hair.

"My aunt—" began A-lu-te.

"Put that butterfly more to the left—so, a little higher, as if it were about to alight."

She turned again to A-lu-te. "I am told you arrived unattended—in a cart. Is that the way my brother-in-law sends his daughter travelling about the country?"

"My aunt," replied A-lu-te, "I set out from Pao-chou with a large escort and bearing letters to you and my Lord Yin from my father. On the road we were attacked by robbers and though the servants fought valiantly, they were overpowered

and killed. The worthless presents my father charged me to present with his respectful salutations were stolen and the contents of my boxes rifled. The robbers intended holding me for ransom. I escaped by the cunning of my *amah*, who quickly changed into my clothes and passed herself off for me, while I, under cover of the darkness, fled and through the kindness of a carter made my way to Peking."

All listened with profound interest to A-lu-te's narrative.

"Aye," said Lady Yin, "I have always heard that robbers were as plentiful as watermelon seeds on that road. Why did my sister wish you to visit me? It was not for love of me, that is certain, for it has been six years now since she has condescended to write or send me any message. She has been foolish to remain angry so long because my husband has superseded hers in office. As if my husband were accountable that his talents are superior to those of your father, and have therefore received deserved recognition from the Empress Dowager!"

"I have not come to visit you, my aunt," returned A-lu-te quietly, "I have come to present myself with the other Manchu maidens for inspection at the Imperial Household Office."

Lady Yin dropped the ornament she had selected from those on a tray a servant was holding before her. She looked annoyed as well as surprised at A-lu-te's statement.

"Why that is in two days! How can you get ready? Your clothes are not suitable. You cannot present yourself in that dress, though I confess it does not look travel-stained.

"My father, desiring that I should appear as well-gowned as the daughters of the Manchu families who live in Peking, ordered a dress to be made ready for me when I arrived. I called for it on my way here and brought it with me."

"It is well that you bethought yourself of that," remarked Lady Yin, gratified to discover that she would not have to disburse money for her niece's clothes.

"Is your name on the list?" she asked.

"Yes. It has been on the list since my fifth year."

"That is true—I forgot. I will see to it that you have a chair and sufficient outriders to accompany you to the Palace. Glad am I that I have borne no daughters to be registered in the government book. I am sorry for you if you are selected; life in the Palace under the Old Buddha¹ is no sinecure. Moreover to be shut up behind stone walls for the rest of one's years, and never to see one's family again, to be little more than a slave, is not my idea of happiness."

Tears came to A-lu-te's eyes. "Nor mine," she murmured. The girl's sad mien moved the heart of Lady Yin. "Ah well, don't be downcast, my dear. One can never tell what may happen.

¹ The name commonly bestowed upon the Empress Dowager.

You are pretty; perhaps the Emperor will take a fancy to you and then, who knows? You may bear him a son."

A-lu-te clinched her little hands tightly, but her face showed nothing of the black despair with which this suggestion filled her heart.

"I hope," continued Lady Yin, "that if you are selected to be a 'Fei' or a 'Pin'" (grades of the imperial concubines) "and acquire influence at Court, you will not forget that I have received you kindly in spite of my sister's undutiful behaviour towards me."

"I will not forget," said A-lu-te, in a low voice.

Through the paint and powder which covered her lovely face she had a worn and weary look.

"Sit down," said Lady Yin. "In a little while we will eat. Then I will make my visits and you can sleep. You look tired."

When Lady Yin's toilet was completed, she repaired with A-lu-te to the large dining-hall. Word had in the interim been sent to the other women of Lord Yin's household that the first Lady Yin was ready to receive their morning greeting. They were her husband's second and third wives and her daughters-in-law. After they had made their obeisance before her, she presented A-lu-te to each of them in turn, recounting, with a certain pride, the adventures the girl had had upon the road, her fortunate escape from the robbers, and the reason of her coming to Peking. A-lu-te stood beside the voluble lady's chair,

passive and silent. When the women had returned to their own apartments, she was invited to eat. After the meal was over, servants brought basins of water and towels, boxes of paint and brushes. Lady Yin washed her hands, touched up the rouge on her lips which had been partially rubbed off, and applied more powder to her face. Then, followed by a long procession of menials, carrying her toilet articles, her pipe, tobacco, and additional clothes, she passed into the court and entered her chair. The house servants took their places in carts; *mafoos* mounted their ponies and the cortège left the compound. Lady Yin had gone to make her round of visits. She had much to tell her friends concerning the arrival of her niece and the adventures she had encountered on the road from Pao-Chou to Peking. In the bedroom assigned to her, A-lu-te sat alone. She was weeping.

CHAPTER VI

THE BREATH OF THE DRAGON

PEKING was taking its after-tiffin nap when Follingsbee, once more in the dress of his countrymen, entered the American Legation.

He had a particular reason for wishing to see Betty again.

The Minister was in his own rooms where he had retired for his siesta. Betty was on the bamboo-shaded veranda outside the drawing-room windows. She held a book in her hands, but she was not reading.

Follingsbee saw her; he did not wait to be announced.

"I have come to apologize. I was abominably rude this morning. Will you forgive me and be friends again?" He held out his hand; she laid her own little white one ever so lightly in his.

"I would like to be friends again," she replied simply. Her manner was entirely gracious and yet Follingsbee felt a subtle change; she seemed indefinably different.

He seated himself in a wicker chair beside her. They were silent for awhile.

Betty was looking toward the flower-garden, Follingsbee was looking at Betty.

She was dressed in a white muslin with a lace fichu knotted over her breast. Her slim rounded arms were bare to the elbows.

"She is like one of Sir Joshua Reynolds's pictures," he thought and fell to admiring the picture in detail, the sheen of the brown hair, the long lashes curling upward at the ends.

Finally Betty spoke, her eyes still fastened on the flower-garden:

"The *mafoo* told me he saw the beggar quite distinctly; he said she did not have smallpox."

Follingsbee came out of his reverie with an abruptness which resembled a jolt.

For a moment he made no reply. Slowly Betty turned her eyes upon him, gravely questioning.

"Did she have smallpox, Mr. Follingsbee?" she asked.

A confused sound that seemed to be a yes, changing into a no, and ending in a cough, expired in his throat.

"I beg pardon!" she said politely. "What did you say?"

"I said no," he replied with sudden decision.

"You thought differently at the time then?"

"I thought of nothing at the time but how to prevent you from approaching her," he returned, his composure quite restored.

Betty sat rigid in her chair. Her voice was full of scorn when she spoke again. "You prevari-

cated and you were rude to me. What was your reason?"

"I have told you—I did not want you to approach the woman."

"Why?"

"You would have recognized her—the second time."

Betty leaned forward; her voice quivered with excitement.

"Mr. Follingsbee, that beggar was my lost *amah* and you knew it all the time!"

"Yes, I knew it."

"Yet you prevented me from helping her! You forced me to turn my back upon her, to leave her crouched in the dust and the dirt of the street, a poor miserable girl, starving, perhaps dying! Oh! How could you! How could you!"

Her eyes filled with hot tears. She brushed them away angrily.

"But I will find her again in spite of you. I will bring her to the Legation, she shall be my beautiful *amah* again! I will send the *mafoo* to search every street, every alley, till he has found her!"

She rose to summon a servant.

Follingsbee laid a detaining, apologetic hand upon her arm. "Don't, Miss Danford! Please don't. It was because of the *mafoo's* presence that I kept you from her. He would have been quick to learn from your exclamations that this beggar, who had been haunting the neighbourhood

of the Legation for the past week, was your former *amah*. He would have told the other servants; by night every tea-house in Peking would be ringing with the tale—it would be the main topic of discussion."

"Do you imagine for an instant that I care what is discussed in the tea-houses of Peking?" returned Betty with infinite scorn.

"The gossip might have worked no end of mischief."

"Really, Mr. Follingsbee, your solicitude on my account is quite unnecessary and—pardon me for saying so—a little absurd."

"You misunderstand me; I was not thinking of you. My anxiety was for—the other young woman."

Betty flushed; her surprise was obvious.

She had—she confessed it to herself—been too engrossed in the injury she conceived done to her own sensibilities and dignity, to reflect that the causes of her *amah's* terrible plight might be due to something more than mere loss of money, a sudden plunge into dire poverty. Now a vague apprehension of some great danger threatening the girl oppressed her.

"I don't understand it," she said piteously. "It is all so strange, so unaccountable. What does it mean, Mr. Follingsbee?"

"Miss Danford, I am going to ask a great deal of you. I am going to ask you to be satisfied with my assurance that the young woman is receiving

and will continue to receive every assistance it is in my power to render."

"Do you mean that I am not to know why she is a beggar, compelled to roam the streets of Peking? That I am not to try and find her? Do you mean that I am to be satisfied with the knowledge that you have given her money and if need be are willing to give her more? Money! thrown to her by a stranger, a man, when she wanted me, whom she knew to be her friend—her woman's intuition told her that, or she would not have returned again and again to the Legation waiting for an opportunity of meeting me. Oh no! I certainly will not, cannot, be content to dismiss her from my mind in that manner. You credit me with too much selfishness, too heartless an indifference, when you ask it of me. She is a girl, like myself, and she is seeking my sympathy, my help."

Follingsbee was looking on the ground; his expression was grave and perplexed. Finally he said:

"Would it content you to know that she was not seeking you, that she neither required or wanted your help?"

"Did she tell you so this morning?"

"No—that is not exactly."

Betty's eyes snapped. "I am going to send for the horses. I must ask you to excuse me as I intend to look for her myself and bring her back with me."

Again Follingsbee stopped her. "You won't find her," he said. "She has dropped her beggar's disguise."

Betty's hand fell from the bell-rope; she stared at Follingsbee blankly. "Disguise!" she echoed. Suddenly a swift spasm of surprise swept her face. "Was it—was it *you* she was waiting for?" she faltered.

"Yes."

Slowly the red blood mounted Betty's cheeks and suffused her face to the roots of her hair.

"Miss Danford," said Follingsbee abruptly, "if I have endeavoured to keep from you the knowledge of that young woman's presence in Peking, it was because you are powerless to render her any assistance and because a great danger threatens her if her identity is discovered."

"Oh!" cried Betty impulsively. "We must tell father. He will see some high official in the Yamen and ask him to protect her. Quick, Mr. Follingsbee, let us go to father!"

Her pretty face was aglow with sympathy and excitement. Follingsbee shook his head despondingly. "No use. You see this affair has a political side which makes it impossible for Mr. Danford to interfere. If he went to the Yamen he would accomplish nothing except possibly his own recall. For his own sake it is better that he knows nothing about the matter."

Betty came close to him. "Mr. Follingsbee," she said earnestly, "please tell me what it is all

about. I am only a girl and often I fear a very foolish one, but a time may come when even I might be of use to her."

She stood before him with the pleading softness in her eyes few had ever tried to resist. But he only repeated patiently, "You cannot help her."

"Won't you let me try?" She laid her hand ever so lightly on his arm. "Please," she said.

He glanced down on the little fingers barely touching his sleeve. "If I tell you," he replied slowly, as if arguing to himself, "it would be equivalent to telling Mr. Danford, and—well, something might turn up which would make it desirable, on his own account, that he have no knowledge of this matter."

"But I promise not to tell him. Can you not trust me to keep my word?"

"It is kind and good of you, but——"

"You won't trust me," said Betty stung into quick comprehension. "*She* would have trusted me," she flashed out passionately. "She would *want* me to know."

The faintest of smiles quivered an instant on Follingsbee's face.

Betty saw it.

"You may laugh," she flamed, "but just the same it is true." She spoke convincingly, and to his surprise he found himself believing.

After a long moment during which he appeared to be thinking deeply he said: "If I tell you will you remember you promised?"

"Yes," she replied. She settled herself in a chair and folding her hands in her lap prepared to listen.

"A-lu-te—" he began.

"A-lu-te! What a pretty name! Where did you first meet her?" Her curiosity was outstripping her patience.

"This morning."

"This morning! But how—" She saw a glint of humour in Follingsbee's eyes, and said quickly: "I won't interrupt again. Truly. Please go on."

"I will tell you the story from the beginning.

"Among my classmates at college was a young Chinese chap, round-faced, good-natured, and jolly. He was an excellent student and a general favourite. His name was Fen-Sha. We called him Curly for no reason that I ever discovered except that his hair was as straight as an Indian's, or as a—Chinese. He was an ardent patriot; to a few of his intimate friends—I was among the number—he used to confide his ambition to organize in his country a Reform Party, its object being to replace all conservative ministers and viceroys, adhering to their century-old traditions, with men imbued with Western ideas, who would be prepared to urge the adoption of reform measures and change China from her present state of a helpless giant, possessing neither strength or power, to her former proud position, that of a wise parent of the Oriental

family of nations, the leader of the Yellow Race.

"I doubt if any of us took these patriotic outbursts very seriously. They occurred but seldom, and if we thought of them at all, it was to regard them as the chimerical dreams of an enthusiast. We were far more interested in Fen-Sha the man, than in Fen-Sha the would-be reformer of Chinese customs older than Christendom.

"But from the day he persuaded me to let him teach me Chinese I ceased to be indifferent. I have, I suppose, a facility for learning languages. At any rate, when he left college, I could speak Chinese fairly fluently. It is a fact that when a man acquires a new language, he acquires with it a keener comprehension, a more vivid interest in the people who speak that language which no amount of reading or travelling without such knowledge can give him.

"After we graduated Fen-Sha returned to China. For a time his friends lost track of him, then I began to hear of him as an indefatigable organizer of Reform Clubs in various parts of the country. He travelled up and down the Yellow River, he went all over the south and north as far as the Great Wall. His name became a household word among thousands of his country people. In his work he was encouraged and assisted financially by Duke Tsing, who not only shared his progressive views, but to whose generosity he owed his college education in America. Fen-

Sha was betrothed to the adopted daughter of his benefactor."

"A-lu-te!" murmured Betty, tense with excitement.

"Yes, A-lu-te. Three days before their marriage was to be solemnized, Fen-Sha was arrested near Tientsin, charged with conspiracy against the Imperial Government. He was thrown into prison, tried, and condemned to death. In two weeks his execution—slow death by the slicing process—will take place. His Reform Clubs are closed by the authorities and the members threatened with death or banishment if they attempt to reorganize. Duke Tsing was arrested, but because of his high official position, the Empress Dowager graciously permitted him to hang himself. His family were banished and A-lu-te was warned that if she put foot again on her native land, she would be sold as a slave to the highest bidder."

Betty listened in wide-eyed, silent horror as this terrible narrative was unfolded. Her own happy world seemed suddenly to have given way to a monstrous universe filled with awful torment, with injustice that left the heart sick.

"It is horrible, horrible!" she cried, her voice breaking into a sob. "Oh, why did she return and expose herself to such a hideous fate!"

"To save Fen-Sha, her betrothed. I have very little hope that she will succeed. Even if her identity is not discovered and she escapes being sold into slavery, her plans for his release are so

hazardous, it is well-nigh impossible that she can carry them to a successful issue. But her courage is magnificent."

"What are these plans?" inquired Betty, holding her breath in suspense.

"Do not ask me—I have told all I can."

Suddenly a fearsome thought came to Betty.

"Do they—the plans—include your co-operation?"

"To a certain extent," he replied carelessly, and added: "That is one of the reasons I do not want your father to be informed concerning this matter. I am an American—well that fact might be an embarrassment to him."

"Will you be in danger at any time?"

A note of keen anxiety rang in her fresh young voice.

"None whatever," lied Follingsbee calmly.

Quite unconsciously Betty gave a sigh of relief. Then she said: "Did you help her to come to Peking as my *amah*?"

"Good Lord, no!" he exclaimed, horrified. "Do not think it for a moment. The plan was arranged and carried out by one of Fen-Sha's Chinese friends in Tientsin. I was not told of it or I should have promptly interfered. If A-lu-te had been discovered on board your boat I hate to think what might have been the consequences to you. When I arrived in Tientsin I received a letter from Fen-Sha's friend saying that A-lu-te would be in the capital after a certain

date and disguised as a beggar. He said she would require financial aid and asked me to obtain it for her. As he knew I had never seen the young woman and would not be able to recognize her in her disguise if I had, he told me how to identify her. Every day for a week I have been roaming the streets, accosting beggar-women, in the hope of finding her. It was the irony of fate that when I was on Legation Street, she was elsewhere. It was a game of hide-and-seek which both of us were doing our utmost to end and without success until I met you this morning and you put me on her track."

"How glad I am that I was of some help to her after all!" cried Betty. "And now, Mr. Follingsbee, I intend to give you all the money I have—it is not much," she added ruefully, "the curio-dealers took most of it an hour ago. But never mind," she said brightening, "I'll get father to buy all my purchases from me."

Follingsbee laughed outright. "You're a young lady of infinite resources. You must keep your money, however. A-lu-te is provided with funds—I have seen to that."

"Father shall buy my curios just the same. You can't be sure that she won't require more money tomorrow, or the day after."

Her gaiety vanished again with the recurrent thought of A-lu-te's danger. "You will let me help in every way I can?" she asked, raising her blue eyes earnestly to Follingsbee.

"In every way you can," he repeated, taking the firm little hand in his. "And now I must be off. You are sure you have forgiven me for my rudeness this morning?"

"Quite sure! And you?"

"Oh! I had nothing to forgive."

"But I was rude also," she insisted.

"No—you were adorable," he said quite seriously.

As Follingsbee threaded his way through the crowded Chinese city to his rooms, he thought of a remark Betty had dropped concerning that particular portion of Peking. "It's all narrow little streets, and big mixed smells," she had declared disgustedly. He laughed as he recalled this speech. He felt singularly elated.

On the following day he went again to the Legation, and on the next and again the next, and always after tiffin when the Minister was taking his siesta. Follingsbee did not choose this hour for the purpose of avoiding the Minister, but because he was assured of being, at that time of day, Betty's only caller.

He told her much about his friend Fen-Sha, of the young reformer's work, of his passionate devotion to his country, his vehement desire to help his people, his faith in their better destiny, and his brave and single-handed efforts towards this end.

"Not single-handed. You helped—you know you did," declared Betty with the swift intuition of her kind.

"In a way—a little perhaps," he admitted reluctantly.

"Tell me about it," commanded Betty.

"There isn't much to tell. I tried to follow him up, and by mixing a lot with the people, particularly the lower class, and gaining their confidence, managed a few times to help him escape just when the officials were about to seize him. They got him at last though, poor chap."

But Betty was not satisfied with this cursory account of the part he took in aiding Fen-Sha and so informed him. Whereupon he told her, quite simply, experiences any one of which repeated abroad would have made him the most talked of man in China, experiences which every young fellow with a taste for adventure would have given his eyeteeth to have lived through and which would have excited the envy and admiration of others too old to be easily stirred.

Betty listened enthralled. Once he stopped short to say: "I beg pardon, I am afraid I am boring you." And she insisted quite peremptorily that he continue.

It is said nothing flatters a man so much as when a pretty girl asks him to talk about himself. It is the sort of thing that works both ways: the girl is equally flattered when the man complies.

The third afternoon, as he was leaving he said: "I shall be at the Prince and Princess Pontioff's ball tonight. Will you give me a dance?"

"You shall have half of Captain Bertram's

waltz. I promised him a whole one—but that was before I knew you were coming.”

It was the first ball that Follingsbee had been invited to attend in Peking. When Princess Pontioff announced her intention of asking him, the Prince had strenuously objected. Whereupon she had raised her eyebrows and replied:

“It is my wish.”

“But why, Gabrielle, why, I ask?” expostulated the Prince, beside himself with annoyance. “You know what he is—a man who associates with the lowest coolies, who——”

“May have a Chinese wife or two——” she interpolated calmly. “And no doubt has. But that doesn’t prevent him from being the most interesting man in Peking. Moreover the Great Mogul of the Imperial Maritime Customs, before whom all the heads of legations—including yourself, *mon cher*—kowitz reverently, has had him to tiffin. I met him there you may remember.”

The Princess as usual emerged from the controversy triumphant, and the Prince, who adored her, didn’t care.

Follingsbee had two dances with Betty that night. Betty afterwards explained so sweetly to the indignant German Chargé d’Affaires, whose dance Follingsbee had taken, that it was a mistake, that the German was mollified and promptly promised himself to arrange a picnic at the Bell Temple in her honour.

Captain Bertram’s indignation however fell

only on Follingsbee. "Deuced bad form—his showing up here," he said.

"Why?" asked Princess Pontioff, who happened to hear him.

"Er—er—because," he replied, an answer which everyone knows has been the exclusive right of women since the days of Eve in the Garden. Bertram infringed on the monopoly to forestall the words he wanted to say. There are times when the little accident of being a gentleman interferes with liberty of speech.

When Follingsbee went home that night, his heart was attuned to a song older far than the walls of Peking. Every day since the world began some man or woman has sung this song. Those who have never sung it have missed what life holds best in youth and happiness. Follingsbee put his own words to the song. They were: "Betty, Betty, Betty, Betty."

On the desk in his rooms he found a box and inside of it a paper. On the paper was written: "Wan Shou Shan." It was the name of the Empress Dowager's Summer Palace.

The box had been brought, said his "boy," by an old woman some hours since.

"So," said Follingsbee to himself, "A-lu-te has gone into the Dragon's maw. It's two to one I won't succeed in getting her out again, but I'll have to make the venture when she sends for me. It's a black outlook for her, for Fen-Sha, and—" he shrugged his shoulders—"for me."

Then he lighted his pipe and fell to thinking of Betty and the two dances she had given him. After a little he knocked the ashes from his pipe and sighed as one who may no longer dream pleasant dreams. He unlocked a trunk in which lay a varied and strange assortment of Chinese clothes. After a careful inspection, he selected a set of garments, placed it on top of the others, locked the trunk again, and went to bed.

CHAPTER VII

THE GREAT EMPRESS DOWAGER

OUT on the great Pechili plain between Peking and the western hills a green chair was being carried. The chair bearers had fallen into a swift steady pace resembling somewhat the trot of the little North China ponies. The wind was blowing. The sun shone through a strange yellow mist which was like a constantly shifting transparent curtain. The air was laden with fine particles of golden sand. The bearers breathed heavily; eyes, ears, and nostrils were caked with sand. The ponies of the escort hung their heads low in vain efforts to escape the sting of the sharp flinty shower.

Inside the chair A-lu-te sat with curtains drawn tight. The chair swayed, rising and falling with every step of the bearers.

Two hours had passed and the motion had not ceased, or varied, not even when the men in the cart had taken the place of those carrying the chair. The transfer was made swiftly, skilfully, and silently. A-lu-te did not move though her limbs were numb from their cramped position.

She sat like a statue, except that now and again she clasped and unclasped her small, slender hands and her lips moved as if in prayer. Suddenly the bearers halted. There was loud talking and shouting of orders. Above the general hubbub arose the shrill voices of women exchanging comments, asking questions. A-lu-te drew the curtains aside and looked out. She saw fourteen other chairs, their occupants all young Manchu girls like herself and as handsomely gowned. Surrounding the chairs were soldiers, officers, and bearers. Someone stepped up to A-lu-te, and asked her to descend. She found herself before the large gates of the Summer Palace. A small gate to the right of the large one was thrown open. Palace eunuchs appeared and invited the young women to enter. They passed into a court beyond which was another more beautiful than any A-lu-te had ever seen.

There were exquisite flowers in profusion and small pink flowering mimosa trees from the branches of which hung gilt cages holding canary birds singing sweetly. In the centre of the court was a marble basin filled with fragrant lotus-blossoms; water from wonderfully carved marble fountains sparkled in the sunlight.

A-lu-te had scarcely time to take in the beauty of the scene when they were conducted to a large pavilion. Here tea and little cakes were served to them. The Manchu maidens tittered and talked among themselves, giving no heed to A-lu-te who

sat apart as if not one of them. Many of these youthful candidates for the Imperial Harem were pretty or would have been except for their vacant expressions. When they had drunk their tea, they moved about the hall, showing off to one another their handsome gowns, the ornaments in their smooth hair, their daintily embroidered shoes. Or they sat on the stiff-backed ebony chairs, chatting, and now and again breaking into little screams of laughter. They were thoughtless, capricious, puerile, and grossly ignorant. Others, the less pretty ones, huddled together, frightened, sad-eyed, thinking of the life that would be theirs within the Palace walls; their liberty gone, their souls embittered, their days ruled by eunuchs, and, except in name, not even concubines, if the Old Buddha so willed. For them the sun would set over a life withered from the start, the flower of their youth never having bloomed.

More than two hours passed and still no one came to summon them before the Empress Dowager. The pretty ones yawned, or examined the furnishings of the room. On the walls hung long white silk panels on which were painted golden characters. Flowery scrolls, they were called. They were suspended in pairs; the inscriptions were contrasts, antitheses, the lights and shades of the poet's thoughts, the painter's fancy. Before one of these ornamental scrolls stood a small, plump girl. She had a round baby face and eyes full of caprice and cunning. Upon the scroll she

was examining was written: "The bright sun rises over the eastern mountains. A new glory re-awakens the earth to the impulse of spring. The pink peach flowers open their beauties to the light and the heart of youth to love."

"I wish I knew what is written there," she said.

A tall girl, with cheeks thickly daubed with almond paste and crimson paint, tossed her head scornfully.

"What! you have not learned to read? How ignorant you are!"

"No more than you," retorted the pretty plump one quickly. The others laughed. The tall girl replied haughtily: "You are in error, I read with ease."

"What says the Flowery scroll?" challenged the pretty one.

The tall girl struck an affected attitude, studied the panel a moment in silence, and in a singsong voice said glibly, "Our primary duty is to make our family illustrious and bring glory to our race."

Her companions were impressed, she had vindicated to their complete satisfaction her pretensions to read.

A-lu-te smiled disdainfully.

The door opened; a tall, magnificently clad eunuch entered. He wore the red button and peacock feather, insignias of exalted rank, never before accorded a eunuch. A-lu-te thought she had seldom seen so ugly a man. His eyes gleamed like live coals in his sunken orbits. His jaw was

lean and heavy; his lower lip protruded. The expression of his face was a curious blending of the servility of a slave and the cold cruelty of a despot. His manners were as polished as the handsome jade buckle which held his belt together. The eunuch was Li Lien Ying, known throughout the Middle Kingdom as P'i Hsiao Li, or Cobbler's Wax Li, the powerful Chamberlain before whom even royal princes and famous statesmen forgot to be haughty. He bowed ceremoniously to the young Manchu girls and addressed to each some comment attesting his knowledge of her father's rank in the capital or province, or something of her family history. They in turn showed him a marked deference. Perhaps because A-lu-te was afraid of him and resented the slight shudder which passed over her slender figure, she drew herself very straight and returned his gaze haughtily.

Li gave her another look of penetrating keenness which she bore without flinching, though her heart throbbed painfully. He did not speak to her. His manner had suddenly changed; he was no longer the suave courtier, but the influential confidant and adviser of the Empress Dowager, the man whose caprice or hatred all at Court except his royal mistress had learnt to fear. He bowed again to the young women, turned, and left the room. Soon Palace eunuchs appeared. The names of ten of the young women were read aloud. They were then conducted to the imperial

pavilion where her Majesty, the Empress Dowager herself, would inspect them. The five girls whose names were not read were invited to return to their homes. They were presented with bolts of silk and boxes of sweetmeats which servants carried before them to their chairs. Cobbler's Wax Li had passed judgment upon them. They were not worthy of being presented to the Empress Dowager for selection for the Emperor's harem.

Among the rejected was A-lu-te.

Her four slighted companions rose hastily to leave the Summer Palace. Their first feeling of humiliation was quickly forgotten in a pleasant realization that they had escaped the slavery of life behind the Palace walls. No one noticed that A-lu-te remained behind in the empty pavilion.

She had not prepared herself for the possibility of not being admitted to the Empress Dowager's presence. Her precautions had been too carefully taken, her plans too well laid that Li should have divined her identity, and fully aware of the comeliness of her person, she had not deemed it in the least probable that the Chief Eunuch would pass adversely upon her physical merits. What then had induced him to reject her? Had she succeeded so far in her perilous undertaking, only to be balked at the very doors of the Palace? An hour passed as she sat in the empty hall thinking deeply. Then she rose and stepped out into the court. At the same moment the Chief Eunuch, followed by his personal attendants, entered the

court, from the opposite direction. When he saw A-lu-te, his face grew dark as if the shadow of a thunder-cloud had fallen athwart it. He turned to one of his menials, the same who had escorted the rejected Manchu maidens from the Palace enclosure.

"How is this, dog?" he exclaimed in an angry voice. "Why did you fail to assist the honourable lady to her chair at the outer gate?"

The trembling servant replied that he thought she had been with those whom he had seen depart.

"Fifty blows of the big bamboo," ordered Li.

Instantly the fellow was seized and thrown down, his back bared and the blows administered. His ashen face was prone on the ground; except for the quivering of his flesh he lay as one dead.

With a sneer undisguised beneath his suavity, Li turned to A-lu-te. "Through the negligence of my servant, I am rewarded; to me falls the honour of escorting you to your chair."

"It is unnecessary; I am not seeking my chair," replied A-lu-te calmly.

Li looked at her and as he looked his anger grew.

"The gate lies yonder," he said harshly. "Go."

"I have been summoned to appear before her sacred Majesty, the Empress Dowager. Do you presume to interfere with her commands? Stand aside and let me pass."

The face of the Chief Eunuch became purple. Never since the death of An Te-hai, the former

powerful favourite of Tzū Hsi, had royal prince or statesman dared speak to him in this manner.

"Woman," his voice was a low snarl, "know that without my consent no one may enter the Precinct. Make haste and begone."

He seized her arm. A-lu-te, with a quick movement, wrenched herself from his grasp and before either Li or his attendants realized, or could prevent her, she had flown past them into the adjoining court and on into the next and next. Finally as her breath was failing, and the pursuing, shouting eunuchs were close upon her, she came to a large quadrangular garden filled with beautiful flowering shrubs and rare exotic plants in great cloisonné pots. At the farther end of this garden she saw a magnificent building, covered with wonderful carving. On the wide veranda of the building hung innumerable lanterns of buffalo horn, shaded with red silk. Attached to every lantern was a red silk tassel from the end of which was suspended a handsome jade ornament. On the doors of this palace, in great red characters, blazed the word "Shou" (Long Life). The shrill, staccato voices of the eunuchs broke into a yell of triumph, for A-lu-te was almost in the grasp of her pursuers. The doors of the palace were thrown open and a woman appeared upon the threshold.

She was below the average in height. Her figure was slender and perfectly proportioned; her manner of holding herself was at once graceful

and imperious. Her dark flashing eyes were veiled by long lashes. Although she was not beautiful, her whole personality had something in it striking and fascinating. She was dressed in a gown of sea-green silk embroidered with white water-lilies. In her black glossy hair gleamed a lily made of white jade and coral; the delicate petals swayed with every motion of her head. A magnificent pearl necklace hung down to her waist. Her slender wrists were adorned with pearl bracelets of rare beauty; on the third and fourth fingers were long gold nail-shields incrustated with pearls. Her shapely feet were encased in green silk shoes embroidered to match her gown and ornamented with tassels of pearl. She appeared to be a woman of thirty-five; as a matter of fact she was over fifty. Such was Tzŭ Hsi, the great Empress Dowager of China. Behind her, straining forward the better to see, stood a group of gaily-gowned ladies. They were insipid-looking dolls with red and white daubed cheeks, pencilled eyebrows, and brilliant carmine patches on their lips.

A-lu-te flung herself on the ground and kow-towed. From under her long lashes Tzŭ Hsi looked at her in amazement. The court ladies gasped. It was in truth a strange spectacle, this which confronted them—a beautiful and richly dressed young Manchu woman, a stranger to them all, forcing her way into the sacred presence, pursued by shouting, angry Palace eunuchs and by the great Chamberlain himself.

"What means this uproar?" demanded Tzŭ Hsi. The Chief Eunuch pointed angrily to A-lu-te prostrate on the ground. "She came with the other candidates to present herself for the Imperial Women's Palace, but was dismissed with the customary gifts. An hour later she was discovered roaming through the courts seeking, no doubt, in her deep guile and ignorance of his absence, to encounter the Emperor."

Tzŭ Hsi frowned. This was indeed an offence passed pardoning. The ten maidens, belonging to the beauty and fashion of the Manchu aristocracy, who had passed before her critical eye that morning, were already lodged in a special part of the Palace to be instructed in court manners and etiquette. Later they would again appear before her, and according to the knowledge obtained of their dispositions and characters, she would retain them at the Summer Palace in her own service, or send them to the Yellow City to be wives—if he so desired—of their sovereign, the young Emperor, Kuang-Hsü.

For a maiden to try and show herself to the Emperor before the Empress Dowager had passed upon her and assigned her to her place, was an unheard-of procedure.

"What is your name? Speak girl!" she commanded, addressing A-lu-te.

"Wangti," came the soft answer. "Your handmaiden is the daughter of your servant Lord Ko

Lin Ch'in in Pao-Chou and niece of your servant Lord Yin in Peking."

A-lu-te had a low, sweet voice, pleasant to the ear, her enunciation was clear, her intonation excellent. The Empress Dowager laid stress on such matters.

"Your conduct is extraordinary. What have you to say concerning it?"

"Yonder Palace menial—he with the gross and ugly face who just spoke—essayed to prevent your handmaiden from presenting herself before your Majesty's August Presence in obedience to her Imperial Decree."

All stood aghast at the intrepidity of this speech. The Chief Eunuch gnashed his teeth in rage. He waited with ill-concealed impatience to inflict the punishment he was convinced would be ordered administered upon this audacious creature.

But the great Old Buddha—as Tzū Hsi was called by the eunuchs—was a woman of impulse. She was kind, gentle, gracious, and affable when no passion excited her. Also the present situation appealed to her sense of humour, of which she possessed an abundant and varied store.

"What think you of your portrait, Li? Gross and ugly! You had best mend your life and so cure the first defect. As for the second, pray to the gods to tell you a remedy. I know of none myself."

She laughed again. "Get up, girl, and let me have a look at you," she said.

A-lu-te rose and stood with downcast eyes before her.

"Hem," said the Empress Dowager, "your face at least cannot be called ugly." She chuckled and threw a malicious glance at her discomfited Chamberlain. Li dug his nails deep into the palms of his hands. He inwardly swore to be avenged not only upon the girl but upon all her family to her most distant relation.

"Would you like to remain with me?" asked the Empress Dowager, tipping up A-lu-te's chin and smiling into her eyes. She had a charm when she chose to exert it, which was irresistible.

"Yes," replied A-lu-te, clasping her hands together. Her eagerness was not assumed. Tzŭ Hsi was pleased. She patted the girl's cheek.

"We will see how you behave yourself. You must not give us any more of your portraits, however, or I fancy you will get into trouble—with the court painters." She laughed again; then turned and entered the imperial pavilion.

"Come," she called over her shoulder.

A-lu-te hastened to obey. She had no desire to be left alone with the Chief Eunuch. She seemed to read in his small, glittering eyes, as he looked at her, something fiend-like.

The court ladies whispered to one another in low, excited voices, as they gently pushed her through the heavy blue satin portières into the throne room.

A-lu-te had a confused impression of walls,

made of beautiful, carved open woodwork, lined with blue satin; of teakwood screens inlaid with lapis-lazuli; of wonderful cloisonné vases; of pyramids of sweet-smelling fruits and bowls of perfumed "Buddha's hands"; of rare orchids in priceless jardinières, and everywhere flowers in bewildering profusion.

Tzŭ Hsi resumed her interrupted painting—the branch of a plum-tree in bloom.

"Can you read?" she asked.

"Yes."

Tzŭ Hsi nodded with satisfaction. Few of the Manchu ladies at her Court could either read or write.

"Have you studied *The Five Ching* and *The Four Shŭ*?"

"Your handmaiden has read them."

"I will see how well you remember what you have read. I will recite and you will finish what I begin."

There were few pastimes which the Empress Dowager, whose memory was prodigious, enjoyed more than quoting from the classics and from her favourite authors. She often entertained herself in this manner with Wang, a scholarly eunuch in the palace.

"Do you know *The Doctrine of the Mean*?" she asked.

"Yes," replied A-lu-te.

Tzŭ Hsi determined to put this assumption of knowledge to a severe test. If the girl had lied

to her, or even bragged unduly, she would turn her over to Li, to be punished and ejected from the Palace.

Tzŭ Hsi had a supreme contempt for those who affected a knowledge they did not possess.

In an exquisitely modulated voice, sweet and musical as the sound of a lute, she began to recite, gracefully gesticulating with her hand.

"The heaven now before us is only this bright shining spot; but when viewed in its inexhaustible extent, the sun, moon, stars, and constellations of the Zodiac are suspended in it, and all things are overspread by it."

She paused.

"The earth before us is but a handful of soil," quoted A-lu-te in her fresh young voice, "but when regarded in its breadth and thickness, it sustains mountains like the Hwâ and the Yo, without feeling their weight, and contains the rivers and seas without their leaking away."

Tzŭ Hsi smiled, well-pleased, and continued:

"The mountain now before us appears only a stone, but when contemplated in all the vastness of its size, we see how the grass and trees are produced on it and birds and beasts dwell on it, and precious things which men treasure up are found on it."

She paused again. Without hesitation A-lu-te carried on the quotation.

"The water now before us appears but a ladleful, yet extending our view to its unfathomable

depths, the largest tortoises, iguanas, iguanodons, dragons, fishes, and turtles are produced in them, articles of value and sources of wealth abound in them."

"Good! Good!" cried the Empress Dowager, "you have read and remembered well." She now recited a long poem from the *Book of Odes*.

"You know that?" she asked when she had concluded the poem.

"Yes, it is from the Odes of Ts'in," replied A-lu-te.

"Ah! We shall get along famously together!" declared Tzŭ Hsi. "You have some wit and knowledge in your head, which is more than I can say for most of the ladies here," and she waved her delicate little hand disdainfully toward the doll-like group standing near.

"Have you knowledge of history?" she continued her catechism.

"A little," said A-lu-te.

"It is a splendid study for men. History is not much use to a woman unless she is an empress. Now, I have derived benefit from the study of dynasties and the separate reigns of the emperors. I know them all perfectly. The Tang dynasty is one of the most interesting. Tao-tsung had a fine mind; we are indebted to him for the preservation of the classics and for the wonderful system of literary examination which has made my country the most learned in the world and my statesmen the most enlightened. And the Empress

Wu, what a great woman we have there! What can you tell me of her?"

"She was a *fei* in the Palace of the Emperor Kau-tsung. She strangled her first-born and accused the Empress Wang-shi of the deed, then persuaded the Emperor to condemn Wang-shi to death and make her his Empress instead."

The Old Buddha waved her hand. "Yes, yes, but those are minor details—unimportant incidents in a great career. She extended the Empire; she formulated excellent laws for the benefit of the people, whose miseries she ever sought to alleviate, she made——"

Tzŭ Hsi stopped abruptly and stared with an expression of anger, surprise, and disgust at the paint-brush she had momentarily laid down while recounting the excellent qualities of the Empress Wu. A fly had alighted on the ivory handle of the brush. Consternation was depicted on the faces of her attendants, as their eyes followed her gaze.

"That," said the Empress Dowager in slow accusing accents, addressing the frightened eunuch at the door, whose duty it was to keep flies from entering the apartment where her Majesty was, "that is the second one this week."

Turning to A-lu-te she said: "You see how badly I am served. All my servants, and all the court ladies too, know how I abhor those flies, yet no one tries to keep the creatures away from me, or even prevent them from actually

alighting on articles I am using! Destroy that brush!" she commanded the eunuch. "I am sorry to lose it; it was a good one. Tell the beater to give you twenty blows with the big bamboo. I shan't paint any more today; I am no longer in the mood. That is always the way—no sooner do I find time for a little quiet recreation than I am harassed and tormented beyond endurance. The wife of a seventh-grade mandarin is better served than I am. Where is Cha?"

A small white Pekingese dog was brought in. He bounded toward his mistress, his long, curly tail wagging ecstatically. "Cha is the only one who really wants to please me all the time." She stroked the little fellow's soft, silky hair and tossed him a sweetmeat which he caught dexterously in the air. Like his royal mistress he was devoted to sweets. He sat now on his fluffy tail and waved his forepaws; his small red tongue lolled out expectantly. She tossed him a second sugar dainty and patted him again.

"That is enough; take him away," she ordered.

Cha was carried out feebly protesting.

A eunuch brought a tray containing a cake of perfumed soap, a towel, and a bowl of hot water. He knelt before Tzŭ Hsi while she carefully washed the hand which had caressed the dog.

"Do you sing," she asked A-lu-te.

"Yes."

"Then come with me; I will rest and perhaps

sleep if your music is soothing. Most of my people here have voices like cats."

The Empress Dowager's nerves had been jarred. She felt irritable in consequence. Under ordinary circumstances these imperial speeches, accompanied as they were by imperial favour would have engendered among the court ladies a feeling of bitter antagonism toward the favoured one and a desire for swift revenge. But not so now. They knew that A-lu-te had gained the enmity of the most influential person at court, namely, the Chief Eunuch. His revenge might be slow in coming, but that it would be terrible was certain. Had they not been witness to the proof of this many times? They were quite willing to leave everything to him and wait.

The Empress Dowager ordered A-lu-te to take the Yueh-Kin, the "full-moon guitar," an instrument of four strings, and follow her into her bedroom. The other ladies were commanded to remain without.

In the bedroom the air was heavy with perfumes.

Near a window stood two long sandalwood tables covered with toilet articles, combs, almond paste, pink powder, lotions made of honey and jasmine, and scented soap of various kinds. Beautifully embroidered white silk curtains hung from the carved sandalwood frame over the bed. On the yellow brocade mattresses were soft sheets of pink, blue, green, mauve, and violet silk; pillows of

the same shades, richly embroidered, completed this riot of colour which in delicacy and loveliness resembled a variegated flower-garden. When the dainty form of Tzŭ Hsi was stretched on this gay bed and her head was pillowed on her favourite cushion of tea-leaves, she might have been taken for a fairy reclining on a fragrant bouquet.

"Sing," she said to A-lu-te, and closed her eyes.

The girl struck the strings of the guitar with her nail and in a soft plaintive voice, pitched in the falsetto key, sang the Bridal Song from the *Shi King*:

Ho, graceful little peach tree,
Brightly thy blossoms bloom
Go, maiden, to thy husband,
Adorn his hall, his room.

A-lu-te sang verse after verse while the Empress Dowager watched her from under half-closed eyelids. She felt irresistibly attracted towards her, and determined to keep her in the Palace. She had no intention of permitting her to enter the Emperor's harem. This was not because the girl was pretty—among the imperial concubines were many quite as good to look upon as she—but because her attractive personality was combined with fearlessness and quick intelligence. Such characteristics were dangerous ones to place near the Emperor. Moreover if the girl bore him a son, her own days of absolute power would be

imperilled. Had she not risen to be autocrat of all China because she herself had wit, beauty, and had attained motherhood? It would be supreme folly to risk a repetition of such a thing in the Palace. She had selected the first and second wives of the young Emperor and all his concubines with the utmost care for this very reason. Many of these women were beautiful, all were insipid, and the Emperor, like herself, could only tolerate, never like, stupid people. To be sure the young Empress—her niece—had a certain keen intelligence, but was nevertheless harmless. She was not attractive; her teeth were black, her skin sallow, her figure bad, and her admiration and fear of her royal aunt all that could be desired. Kuang Hsü detested this wife of his. He had evinced his dislike the first day of their marriage by throwing his shoe at her. Tzū Hsi had carefully fostered the estrangement till now only a thinly veiled enmity existed between the two, an enmity most useful to her own purpose.

While these thoughts flashed through the Imperial Lady's mind, A-lu-te finished her song.

The Empress Dowager pretended to sleep.

A-lu-te stood quite still, gazing long and thoughtfully upon the charming face.

The dark eyes which gave to the royal countenance that look of vivacious intelligence were hidden under long black lashes; the soft olive of the complexion was free from paint or cosmetics;

about the rather large mouth lurked a smile, sweet and appealing as that of a child; in the small firm chin alone lay a suggestion of that iron will which brooked no opposition and which had helped to make Tzŭ Hsi the greatest woman in the history of China. As A-lu-te looked, she wondered if it could be true that this gracious little lady was the same who had commanded her adopted father to commit suicide and who had condemned Fen-Sha, her playmate, friend, and betrothed, to the lingering death, to the dreadful slicing process.

Tzŭ Hsi suddenly opened her eyes wide. A-lu-te started guiltily.

"Well? What do you think of me?" The silver voice rang with an amused challenge.

"Your handmaiden thinks that your Majesty and Kuan Yin" (the Goddess of Mercy) "must be sisters, so great is their resemblance to each other," returned A-lu-te. Now one of the favourite diversions of the Empress Dowager was taking part in elaborate court pageants attired as Kuan Yin, to whom she loved above all things to be compared. A-lu-te's quick reply was therefore a particularly happy one and greatly pleased the Empress Dowager.

"Wangti," she said softly, "come here—nearer—so." A-lu-te sank on her knees by the bed. Tzŭ Hsi touched the bowed head lightly, tenderly. "I do not know why it is, but I feel as if I had always known you—always loved you, and I want

you always to try and please me, so that I need never have cause to be angry with you. Please promise me this, will you?"

"Yes," said A-lu-te in a low voice.

"Call one of the eunuchs in attendance in the outer room," commanded the Empress Dowager, and when he appeared she issued a few rapid orders. The eunuch kowtowed and hastened from the royal bedroom. Turning to A-lu-te again, Tzŭ Hsi said: "You can go now and rest till I send for you. I have assigned the eunuch S'ang to be your servant. He will show you your room. One of the court ladies, Chou-Chau, has the same house with you; you need not be polite to her."

When A-lu-te left the room the court ladies in attendance crowded around her. The eyes of some expressed ill-will, others merely vapid curiosity. A-lu-te was plied with questions which she was at no pains to answer. "I am commanded to seek my room; I cannot stay to talk," she said, and followed the eunuch who was to conduct her to her pavilion. A-lu-te had successfully installed herself in the Summer Palace. Would she succeed as well in the next step of her perilous plan? This was the question she asked herself as she followed her guide.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PERILS IN THE PALACE

THE pavilion in which A-lu-te found herself was a charming little building overlooking terraces resplendent with flowers. The pavilion, with its gaily painted pillars, its bright tiled roof and ornamental eaves and general look of an exquisite Oriental tent solidified, resembled, except in size, most of the dwellings in the Summer Palace.

In A-lu-te's room, the windows commanded a marvellous view of hills, temples, and lake. Rose-silk awnings shed a soft subdued light in the interior; rose-silk hangings showed through the interstices of the screen-like walls, and rose-silk cushions covered the ebony chairs and K'ang. A fresh sweet fragrance from the flower-filled courts permeated the air. It was a retreat to rest in, to dream pleasant dreams. But A-lu-te was indifferent to its charm. She dropped into a chair, a sense of unreality upon her. She thought of her journey to Peking as maid to the care-free, happy foreign girl, of her arrival in the capital, her beggar's disguise; her old *amah's* joy at seeing her again, her search for Fen-Sha's friend; her

visit to the house of Lady Yin, and finally her presence in Wan Shou Shan. All this appeared to her a phantasmagoria. She asked herself whether it was true that she was in the Summer Palace; that she had really passed the scrutiny of the formidable Chief Eunuch and successfully ingratiated herself with the Empress Dowager. How would it all end? Would she succeed in saving Fen-Sha, or would she not only lose her own life, but hasten the execution of his terrible death sentence?

These reflections clashed in her head, till her brain grew weary and her heart grew chill and heavy. But her indomitable courage and confidence—the two strong pinions of her soul—soon bore her up again from the depth of despondency. She now recalled every word and look the Empress Dowager had given her; they indicated something more than mere transitory liking for the young stranger who had forced her way into the royal presence, something more than passing pleasure in her personality and her intelligence. A-lu-te was sure of this; for she herself had experienced a strange sense of attraction, even of sympathy for the great Empress, and this in spite of the causes she had to hate and abhor her.

As these thoughts passed in rapid succession through A-lu-te's mind she was subconsciously aware of the recurrent sound of a hard rasping cough. The cough now became a paroxysm, lasting several minutes. A-lu-te rose, entered

the middle hall, and followed the direction from which came this painful sound. It led her into a small unattractive room. A thin little figure, gaily clad, lay on the K'ang.

A-lu-te first thought she was in the presence of some child, till drawing nearer she saw that the small sickly face belonged to a young woman.

She remembered suddenly that the Empress Dowager had said, "One of the court ladies—Chou-Chau—shares the house with you. You need not be polite to her."

"Are you the Lady Chou-Chau?" she asked.

The young woman, unaware of A-lu-te's entrance till she spoke, rose hastily from the K'ang and courtsied.

"Yes," she said in a frightened voice. "Am I late? Has Lao Fo Yeh" (the great Old Buddha) "sent you for me?"

"No, I heard you coughing. You look sick; can I help you?"

An expression of surprise, almost incredulity, swept over the thin face of Chou-Chau. "You heard me coughing and came to help me? How curious!" she exclaimed.

"Why is it strange that I should wish to help you?" asked A-lu-te.

"Why?" answered the other, staring hard at her visitor. "Because it is not customary here to help any one."

Her voice was not bitter. She was merely imparting information to one inquiring for it.

A-lu-te shivered a little and was silent.

"When did you come?" continued Chou-Chau.

"This morning."

"Is your room in this house?"

"Yes, on the other side of the hall."

"The large room with the rose curtains? It is pretty in there. Sometimes I stop to look in when I pass the door."

"The next time you must come inside and sit down."

Again Chou-Chau appeared surprised. She turned to a small lacquer cabinet, opened a drawer, and took from it some red and white paint which she proceeded to apply in an inartistic manner to her forehead, cheeks, and lips. With a charred stick she blackened her eyebrows to resemble a crescent moon. When her task was completed she resembled a mocking death's head, grotesquely painted. "I must go now. It is my turn to sit today," she said.

"To sit! What do you mean?" inquired A-lu-te curiously.

"When Lao Fo Yeh takes her nap some of the court ladies watch in her room."

"Then you need not hurry; her Majesty has already had her nap," said A-lu-te.

This announcement threw Chou-Chau into the greatest consternation. "She has had her nap!" she cried, wringing her hands. "Yet it is a full hour before her usual time. Oh! what shall I do! What shall I do!"

"If, as you say, it is a full hour before her usual time why are you so frightened? It is not your fault that you were not on time."

"What difference does that make? I shall be punished just the same. I only came back to rest a little while—I was so tired and my cough bothered me. And now I am late!" She looked terrified.

A-lu-te did not attempt to disguise the scorn she felt for such pusillanimity. "Don't be so frightened. One would suppose you were going to receive a beating—like any slave girl or eunuch."

Chou-Chau ceased wringing her hands. Her expression changed abruptly from pronounced fear to quiet amusement. A-lu-te felt a return of that little shiver which had come to her before in this room.

"It is plain to be seen that you are a newcomer here."

With these words Chou-Chau hurried from the pavilion.

A certain faintness came to A-lu-te, as one overpowered with sudden weariness.

In the middle hall she saw that the eunuch S'ang had returned.

"Will you have tea?" he asked.

She shook her head and entered her room. A few minutes later S'ang appeared with a tray upon which was a bowl of tea, also some bread stuffed with mince-meat.

"Eat, it is time," he said and placed the tray before her.

"Eat," repeated the eunuch.

Mechanically A-lu-te drank the tea, but left the bread untasted.

She pushed the tray from her.

"Remove it," she ordered.

She sank on the K'ang and closed her eyes. Her interview with Chou-Chau had unaccountably left her with less hope, less courage. She had but a week in which to save Fen-Sha; until now she had not faltered in her daring plan; she had surmounted the worst difficulties by the very audacity with which she had encountered them; she had faced, it may be, the worst dangers awaiting her, and yet a few words dropped from the mouth of a sickly woman had sapped her courage, left her unnerved, frightened, without knowing why. She gritted her teeth and moaned aloud.

S'ang heard her. "Are you in pain?" he asked, coming in.

"Yes. My head is hurting me."

The eunuch disappeared and returned again with two mulberry leaves steeped in vinegar; he laid them on her temples. "It will cure the pain," he said. She heard him later in the middle hall, reading or reciting in a low voice. The monotonous sound had a quieting effect on her. She fell into a half doze, during which she was vaguely conscious of trying to hear what he was saying. From this uneasy sleep she soon awakened to be

tormented again with the knowledge of Fen-Sha's fate. She tried to picture what life would be without him, haunted as she would be with the remembrance of his terrible death. The blood mounted into her cheeks, she pressed her hands over her eyes as if to shut out the picture, then another came to her, a picture of herself, living out long dreary years behind the palace walls, the slave of a capricious old woman and perhaps—she clinched her teeth again—of a dissolute young man. "Never that, never that," she whispered hoarsely. She buried her head in her outstretched arms and fell to weeping bitterly.

S'ang's voice roused her.

"You are unhappy," he said. "I know nothing of your sorrows, but I know the means wherewith you can dispel them like clouds before the wind."

A-lu-te turned towards him with eager, questioning gaze.

Silently the eunuch held out a small book.

"Oh, that!" said A-lu-te contemptuously; "I have tried it—it is worthless."

| She thought he had a copy of the Imperial Almanac, which is published yearly under the authority of the Astronomical Board, and contains lists of the lucky and unlucky days.

"Read," said S'ang still holding out the book.

Her eyes rested carelessly on the cover. She read aloud, "The Gospel of St. John."

"It is not the almanac then. What is this St. John?" she asked.

"He was the loved disciple of our Lord," replied the eunuch.

"Of Sakya-muni Buddha? I do not know him," she said indifferently.

"Nay, nay, not of Buddha; but of the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Ah, now I recall hearing that name; he is the idol worshipped by the foreigners."

"He is not an idol. He is our Lord," returned S'ang.

A-lu-te leaned forward and regarded the eunuch intently.

"S'ang," she said in a low voice, "are you a worshipper of this God of the foreigners?"

"Yes, lady," he replied simply.

"And you dare admit it! You dare offer prayers to the strange God, here, in the very Palace of the Empress Dowager? Profound would be your sleep tonight if I were to tell her!"

"You will not tell her," he replied quietly.

"Why not?"

"Because you are different from those who are here and you do not hate the foreigners." A sudden fear of him came over A-lu-te. Did this eunuch know more of her than the others?

"What cause have you for thinking I do not hate them?" she asked, trying to keep the fear from her voice.

"You call them foreigners and not devils and barbarians."

"You are right, I do not hate them. I have

indeed cause to be grateful to them." In her relief she admitted more than she had intended. But S'ang noticed the admission only to reply, "And I," with such fervour, A-lu-te was moved to ask what benefits he had received from the foreigners.

"They taught me to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Oh, that!" said the girl shrugging her shoulders.

"I was unhappy even as you are," continued the eunuch, "I was as one groping in a black pit, without hope, without a morrow. Disgust and weariness were my companions throughout the day and lay down with me when I sought my bed at night. Then I was led from the blackness of the pit into the bright sunlight, into the pure air; joy came to me and peace. These, too, can be yours, if you will learn to know, to believe in the Lord Jesus."

"Your God is powerless to help me," said A-lu-te gloomily, and added: "Leave me now; I have need of rest."

He turned to go when she called sharply to him. He came back, standing quietly before her.

"This God of yours, does he help those who ask it of him?"

"Yes, if they believe in Him."

"Do you believe?"

"As truly as that I am now alive, standing in this room in your presence;" he spoke the words slowly with deep solemnity.

"Have you ever wanted anything so much you would give your life to obtain it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well, and have you asked your God to give it to you?"

"Yes, I ask Him every morning when I wake and every night before I sleep."

"Then it appears this God of yours won't help you after all, since you must needs ask him day after day and night after night; your God is no better, no more merciful, no more powerful than any other god, than Buddha for instance, before whom I have prostrated myself so many times in prayer I have fainted from fatigue, and all without avail."

She spoke bitterly.

"I have faith that my prayers will be answered. I am content to wait."

The eunuch gazed out of the window on the temple-crowned hills in the distance. His lips moved, though no sound fell from them.

"You are praying," said A-lu-te, watching him curiously. "What are you asking this God of the foreigners?"

For a moment the eunuch looked troubled and hesitated.

"I cannot tell you," he said.

"You mean, you will not," returned A-lu-te haughtily. "Stop and consider. Do I not already hold your life in the palm of my hand? I have only to tell Lao Fo Yeh that you pray to the

foreign God and you know well what will happen. Now listen to me. I am in great trouble. I will prostrate myself before this foreign God and pray to him, if you can convince me that he is powerful enough to help me."

"I will try to convince you."

"But how can I know that you are not deceiving me if later you come to me declaring your petition has been granted, since you refuse to tell me what that petition is?"

The eunuch looked earnestly at A-lu-te, then, as if possessed of a sudden resolve, said: "My petitions are for the Emperor. My prayers are that he may be taught the true faith, the Christian faith."

"What!" exclaimed A-lu-te, surprised for a moment into forgetting her troubles. "You pray for a thing like that! What foolishness to waste breath in such prayers! Moreover who would have the presumption to try and induce the Lord of Ten Thousand Years to forswear the religion of his Ancestors?"

"I," replied the eunuch. His eyes flashed with a strange light; on his pale, thin face was depicted an ecstasy of hope.

A-lu-te looked at him in amazement. "You!"

"Yes, even I."

"But you are not of his household. You can never approach him, much less can you seek permission to address him," she reminded him.

"God will help me. He will find a way." He spoke with the conviction of perfect faith.

"Yes—when the Yellow River runs dry. You are aiming at the impossible," said A-lu-te with an accent of impatience. It seemed to her that the eunuch's prayers and belief were not only useless but essentially paltry; that they did not deserve time for speculation or discussion.

"To those who have faith nothing is impossible," replied S'ang. He pointed out of the window to a stone wall surrounding the court. "Do you see that tender green plant which has forced a passage through the thick wall yonder? And the other one which has made its way, while still a feeble small shoot, to this side and has grown so large and strong it has split great stones apart? Have not those little plants achieved the impossible? And why should not I?"

"Or I!" murmured A-lu-te to herself, then fell to studying S'ang's face. What had taken place in the mind and heart of this eunuch to make him so different from others of his despised breed?

As if in answer to her unspoken thought, S'ang said:

"Do you desire that I speak to you of myself?"

"I am listening," replied A-lu-te.

CHAPTER IX

THE EUNUCH'S STORY

"I WAS born in the province of Pechili," began the eunuch, "in the village of Makian, two hundred *lis* north of Peking. My father was a rich man. He owned camels by the score; these, laden with tea and merchandise, journeyed periodically beyond the Great Wall, in charge of his servants. The cargo was sold at large profits and on its return the caravan carried coal from Mongolia to be disposed of in the Peking market. The business flourished and yearly grew more lucrative. My father had two wives, but my mother was the legitimate consort. She died the third year after my birth. I was six when my father took to his house another woman. She came from the south and belonged to one of the nine classes of professional women of evil renown. She was a dancer. Her beauty was great, she was in fact the eye of the peacock. It was said of her she could dance her way into any man's heart and that none were so rich but that she could spend what they had and make them poor. What truth there was in these reports which came

to my childish ears, I know not, I only know that from the day she entered my father's abode, peace fled out of the door. You know the proverb: 'One key makes no noise, but two keys create a jingle.' The women quarrelled, there was jealousy and backbiting, and the house became a pandemonium, so that in the village there was a saying, 'as noisy as the house of Tang.' The new concubine was a violent-tempered woman; she often caused my father to eat bitterness—a bitterness like that of aloe-juice—yet her influence over him was great, and when she bore him a son it became supreme. One year—I was fifteen at the time—a sickness common in the north beyond the Wall struck the camels and one after another they died. That same year a great drought visited the land and our crops were killed. Disaster after disaster fell upon us, till a time came when we were no longer the rich family of the village, but the poorest. One day my aunt—the concubine of the south—saw me eat a millet cake she had laid aside for her own son. She complained of me to my father and represented to him that I was an idle, worthless fellow, a mere tortoise-egg, that I would never amount to much, and that the best thing which could happen to me and to the family was to sell me to Huang-ti. On hearing her speak in this manner, I was terribly frightened for I felt convinced she would succeed in persuading my father to do as she wished. Huang-ti lived in a neighbouring village and did a thriving

business supplying rich mandarins, dukes, and princes of the blood in Peking with eunuchs.

"I implored my father not to sell me to this man, for I did not want to become a eunuch, and he not being a hard-hearted parent was disposed to yield to my entreaties. But my aunt, who possessed a volubility of tongue truly alarming, reproached him with loud cries and lamentations for not considering the welfare of the other members of his family, and leaving them to suffer in poverty when by selling me to Huang-ti he not only provided me with a career which might bring me eventually into the Yellow City and so to large emoluments, if I had wit enough to procure them, but also enabled me to return to my father the benefits he had already bestowed upon me. My father, weary of contending with her, and it may be seeing sense and reason in her demand, yielded. I wept bitterly, but my father was obdurate. He told me to remember the great lesson taught in the Trimetrical Classic which imposes absolute obedience upon the child to his parent.

"And so I left the family."

After a moment's silence the eunuch continued.

"Huang-ti entered me in the service of a Manchu prince. I was in the household five years and became the confidential adviser, even instigator of every kind of wild escapade, to the seventeen-year-old son of the prince. One day, the princess, desiring to make a pilgrimage to a Buddhist monastery, commanded me to precede her in charge

of the scrolls, the silk embroidered hangings, the mirrors and rich cloisonné vases which were to be used to decorate the bare guests' house the priests assign to visitors. Now I had assisted the young prince in an intrigue with the wife of a petty shopkeeper. She bore him a girl-child, and he not caring to be bothered with the little one, had her passed under the bridge" (drowned). "I was present when this was done and heard the frightened wail of the infant as she was dropped into the well, and saw the small arms stretched feebly up for help, as the water swallowed her. I had seen and shared in much wickedness, of which this act was not the worst, for such drowning of girl infants is not contrary to established usage as you know. But the memory of this deed stayed by me night and day; the cry haunted me, the baby arms pursued me, and I finally determined to consult a wise man to rid me of the obsession. Now in passing through the village of Yang-lin, on my way to the monastery, I heard of a geomancer, residing there, one very learned in his craft. I stopped to see him, but he had been called away by a wealthy tax-gatherer to a distant village. As I sat before his closed house, very dejected, I noticed across the street, over the door of a miserable hut, a sign, which read: 'Pulun, little assistant to Jesus.' Not knowing what it meant and being curious, I knocked at this door. A benevolent looking old man appeared in answer to my summons.

“‘Are you Pu-lun?’ I inquired.

He replied that he was indeed the man.

“‘Then,’ continued I, not knowing what else to say at the moment, ‘you are the little assistant of Jesus.’

“‘With a joyous expression he said: ‘You have spoken truth. Come in. Come in.’

“‘I followed him into a room which, though small and meanly furnished, was clean.

“‘Do you, too, love Jesus?’ he asked.

“‘Old man,’ I said, ‘what are you talking about? I never saw or heard of this Jesus. How then should I love him? Is he your master? And what is his trade?’

“‘He is my Master, and His trade is teaching love.’

“‘Ho-ho,’ said I, laughing, ‘that is a pretty name for the business you follow. In the city we call it——’

“‘Wait,’ commanded the old man, holding up his hand, ‘wait till you hear what I have to say. The love which the Master enjoins upon us is love for all mankind, the love which teaches kindness, purity, forgiveness, which returns good for evil. He who loves like this, becomes a child of God, his sins are forgiven him; he finds peace in life and eternal joy in life after death.’

“‘I thought to myself that this kind of teaching was worth looking into; that although it seemed impractical, it might rid me of my obsession. I asked Pu-lun to become my instructor. He con-

sented with eagerness, and I agreed to return at a certain hour every week to receive his lessons. This I did, until the time came when the prince, in accordance with the law which compels rich nobles to supply the Imperial Palace periodically with one eunuch, sent me here. My visits to Pu-lun ceased, but the joy and the wonder of that which he taught me will abide with me through life."

The eunuch's narrative had made a profound impression upon A-lu-te.

"What did this Pu-lun teach you?" she asked.

In earnest, simple words S'ang told her the story of Christ as he himself had received it from the lips of Pu-lun.

"So this is the religion of the foreigner!" exclaimed A-lu-te when the eunuch ceased speaking.

"It is preposterous! Is that a good father who sends his dutiful son to be murdered by wicked people in order that they and others as wicked should be saved? Is that justice? Is that kindness?"

"It is love—the highest, the most wonderful that can be conceived," said S'ang.

"Well, it is a strange love," retorted A-lu-te.

"As for the teachings, they do not differ greatly from the teachings of Buddha. Does he not tell us not to do evil and not to seek after riches? Truly the moral precepts of the God of the foreigners and of Buddha are the same."

"They are as like as day is to night," replied the eunuch. "The religion of our Lord Jesus Christ is the religion of Hope; the religion of

Buddha is the religion of Despair. Buddha holds the soul of no account; he says: 'Eschew evil and in time you will cease to exist, you will be lost in the all-embracing Quietus, you will enter Nirvana—your spirit will sink into nothingness.' Our Master teaches us, not only to eschew what is evil, but to do that which is good. He promises those who believe in Him, who follow his precepts, inexhaustible happiness and life everlasting. Listen to what he says."

S'ang opened the book which he still held in his hand and in a low voice began to read. As A-lu-te listened she told herself that S'ang was right, that there was something wonderful in the promises the words contained, in the hope they inspired in an aching human heart. When he read: "Ask and ye shall receive," she repeated the sentence over and over to herself, nor did she listen any more to S'ang's voice.

Suddenly vague shouts reached them from the distance. The shouts came nearer and nearer; they were the cries of eunuchs announcing to all the Palace world that "The Great Buddha wakes up, the Great Buddha wakes up."

S'ang slipped the book up his sleeve, as a eunuch rushed into the room, calling: "Imperial Decree says that Lady Wang-ti is to come before the Presence." Reluctantly A-lu-te made haste to follow him to the pavilion of the Empress Dowager. She wanted to pray to the unknown God who had said: "Ask and ye shall receive."

CHAPTER X

FAILURE

A-LU-TE found the Empress Dowager attired for a walk. Instead of the stilt-like Manchu shoes she wore on ceremonial occasions and in the palace, she had on a dainty pair of low-heeled slippers. The heavy Gu-un Dzan had been discarded and her dark hair was coiled high in a simple knot, ornamented with a single rose, in place of the jewels she had worn that morning. Her blue silk dress was short, not to impede her walking. In her hand she carried a white wand-like stick. She was accompanied by all the court ladies, among them the Lady Chou-Chau. A-lu-te threw a hasty glance in her direction, and noted that Chou-Chau was smiling with timid contentment.

The Empress Dowager called out gaily: "I am going for a long walk, and I shall eat in a peony thicket on top of a hill where the view is beautiful. I am very happy today, and I want everyone around me to be happy too."

The procession started, the Empress Dowager leading, the court ladies following. After them

came twenty eunuchs and six *amahs*, bearing boxes containing dresses, wraps, shoes, perfumes, water-pipes, handkerchiefs, looking-glasses of various sizes, yellow paper, and red ink. Any one of these articles Tzŭ Hsi might require during the next hour or two. One servant was detached from the procession. He walked a few steps behind and to one side of his royal mistress, holding in outstretched hands a yellow satin stool for her to rest upon when tired. The procession was closed by the bearer of a large yellow bag filled with bamboo sticks which was always carried wherever her Majesty went, so that punishment could be promptly administered to delinquent servants. The Empress Dowager ordered A-lu-te to walk beside her. When the procession was forming, Chou-Chau had whispered hurriedly into A-lu-te's ear: "I was only a little late; she was sleeping and no one noticed me; they were talking about you."

Tzŭ Hsi had keen eyes and quick ears.

"What did that woman say to you a moment since?" she demanded. They were following the fine-wrought white marble balustrading which stretched along the borders of the lake.

"She said she had forgotten to bring a wrap and asked if S'ang would fetch her one."

"She need not take such excellent care of her health. Stupid people are not scarce in this world," remarked Tzŭ Hsi caustically. The next minute her mood changed. She plucked a flower and

held it caressingly to her cheek. "The heart of summer lies in it," she said, "how gladsome it is, how sweet! Since the days of my youth—which, alas, passed swiftly as an arrow's flight—my greatest solace has been the contemplation of nature. I have commanded to be engraved on six thicknesses of imperial silk, these words of mine: 'Study the beauties of nature—it is the road which leads to inward freedom and serenity.'"

She stood still; her dark eyes glowing with tender light rested alternately on the silver-sheen of the lake, on the distant winding streams, the peony-covered terraced hillside nestling in the shadow of the rugged Western Hills where the yellow upturned temple-roofs gleamed in the sunlight.

Suddenly she threw a backward glance at the procession of court ladies and servants and broke into a gay little laugh. "See, how silly they look! They are wondering why I am standing here staring into space. That is the way with them; they care nothing for a beautiful view and cannot comprehend any one who does. Even Li here, who is not without real brains, sees in nature only ground that is high or low, wet or dry, water that is smooth or rough, deep or shallow, skies that are bright or overcast, trees that are green or not according to the season, and plants with or without flowers. Well, you can't teach sheep to climb trees, or make poets of men who have no ink in their stomachs. Am I right, Li?"

The Chief Eunuch, who had approached the instant he heard his name mentioned, replied:

"I should be lying like a Nanking bird-hawker if I said no; yet I am not destitute of poetic imagination."

"Poetic imagination! You! Prove it! Prove it!"

"In a cup of wine I admire the blush of the young peach. Can a poet do more except to rhyme what I put in prose? And perhaps to drink so deep of the blush that it leaves sooner the cup to glow triumphantly at the end of his nose?" retorted Li, with a broad smile.

Tzŭ Hsi laughed. This servant possessed the art of diverting her. It was one of the reasons of his great influence over her. He was intelligent, witty, and when in her presence, invariably amiable. His manner towards A-lu-te had completely changed; he treated her with polite deference, showing no sign of the fierce passion for revenge which gnawed at his heart. The character of the Chief Eunuch was an intricate web, in the midst of which his mind sat like a hideous and venomous spider. He had three passions, greed, revenge, power. He had one virtue, loyalty to his imperial mistress.

Tzŭ Hsi resumed her walk. She had a quick light step and those who followed had much ado to keep pace with her. Finally they arrived at that part of the lake where Tzŭ Hsi had elected to take the imperial boats. Two of these boats

resembled magnificent pagodas floating on the water. The Chief Eunuch assisted her Majesty to embark. A-lu-te was told to follow, while the court ladies entered the second boat. The imperial float was attached by yellow ropes to three large rowboats manned by seventy-two rowers, who stood to their oars as they plied them in unison.

Tzŭ Hsi seated herself on a yellow-cushioned chair and invited A-lu-te to occupy the red cushion at her feet. The day was singularly beautiful; the lake smooth and crystal clear, except where here and there thick clusters of lotus-flowers rested on the water like small pink islands. As the little fleet receded from the marble-terraced banks, two eunuchs, standing in the bow of the Empress Dowager's boat, began to sing. Their voices, musical, clear, and sweet, mingled with the soft sound of the water stirred by the oars of the rowers.

Presently the Empress Dowager raised her hand.

"Stop," she commanded, "your song makes me sad. I am growing old and cannot afford to indulge in that feeling. In the afternoon of life one should beware lest one forgets how to laugh and be happy. Let a story be read."

She had scarcely given the order when she turned to A-lu-te.

"Wang-ti, you shall tell me a story, but let it not be sad."

"Your handmaiden will relate a tale from Liao Chai Chih, if your illustrious Majesty permits," replied A-lu-te and receiving permission she began:

"An old woman past seventy lived in Chao Ch'eng. She was a widow and had one son who was her sole support. One day he went into the forest to chop wood and was eaten by a tiger. The old woman prepared to commit suicide for how could she live with no one to bring her food or to care for her? However, in thinking the matter over, she determined to go to the magistrate instead. Weeping and lamenting she told him her sad plight and begged him to have the tiger arrested.

"'Ha-ha,' laughed the magistrate, 'who ever heard of bringing a tiger to the Yamen!' The old woman continued her lamentations and hopping up and down before the magistrate, besought him to do as she asked."

A-lu-te imitated the shrill cries and lamentations of the old woman and jumped up and down in so ludicrous a manner that the Empress Dowager was highly entertained.

"The magistrate, disliking so much noise and clamour, and in order to be rid of her, pretended to accede to her request. But the old woman sank on her knees and refused to move until the warrant of arrest was issued. Finally the warrant was duly drawn up and the magistrate asked his police officers which one would serve it. Among the lictors was a certain Li-hêng. He

had spent the previous night carousing in a tavern and his head was heavy and his mind not clear. The others knowing this pushed him forward and he was made to consent. Now when Li recovered from the effects of his carousal and discovered what he had promised, he was horrified. But he quickly consoled himself with the thought that the magistrate would not compel him to serve such a silly summons. After two days the magistrate, who had again been plagued by the old woman, sent for him, had him flogged for his dilatoriness and ordered him to go forth immediately and serve the summons. With fearful heart and trembling greatly Li went into the forest to seek the tiger. But he did not find him. He then went to the temple of a local divinity whose shrine lay to the east of the city. He knelt before the image and prayed for help. As he rose to leave the temple, a tiger entered the door. Li-hêng was terribly frightened; he expected to be eaten. But the beast remained motionless, his head bowed to the ground. Seeing him so quiet, Li gathered courage and said:

“ ‘Did you kill the old woman’s son?’ ”

“The creature raised his head and roared admission of his guilt.”

Here A-lu-te tried to imitate a tiger’s roar and succeeded in making a sound not unlike an angry kitten, which caused the Empress Dowager to laugh consumedly.

A-lu-te continued her narrative.

“‘As you have admitted your guilt,’ said Li-hêng, ‘I must place the chain around your neck and take you to the office of the magistrate.’ This he proceeded to do. The magistrate being informed of his arrival, sent for the old woman. Then he questioned the tiger: ‘Did you kill the son of this old woman?’ he asked. The animal bowed his head.

“‘Murder is a capital offence,’ said the magistrate, ‘and in your case an unusually heinous one, for this old woman was entirely dependent on her son. But I will let you go free on condition that you support her for the remainder of her natural life.’ Again the tiger bowed his head humbly. The chains were removed and he trotted off. The old woman, however, was very indignant because he was not put to death; ‘great folks, may set the town in a blaze; common folks mustn’t even light a lantern,’ she muttered angrily as she hobbled off. But the next morning she found a dead deer lying before the door of her cottage. She sold the hide and venison and supplied her needs with the money she obtained. Every morning the tiger brought venison to the cottage and frequently other choice food. The old woman waxed rich, for the tiger supported her better than her son had been able to do. He often came and lay under the eaves of the cottage, and the old woman would pat and caress him, for she had become fond of the beast. When she finally died the tiger came to the cottage door, pushed it open

with his paw, and howled forth his grief. He appeared again at the grave, leaping in among the mourners, and roared like thunder."

A-lu-te illustrated the roaring with much vigor. The Empress Dowager shook with laughter: "Excellent, excellent!" she cried. "I have heard the late Emperor's sleeve-dog make quite as fierce a noise! What became of Sir Tiger?"

"Having thus loudly proclaimed his sorrow at the old woman's death, he walked away weeping and was never seen again. The people of Chao-Ch'eng however erected a shrine outside the west gate to commemorate his devotion."

The Empress Dowager was in the best of humours when she left the pagoda boat to be carried in her chair to the summit of the peony-hill which commanded a lovely view of the palace grounds and the surrounding country. In a rustic summer house she sipped tea from a white jade cup on a golden saucer, presented by a kneeling eunuch, while a second eunuch held a gold tray containing blossoms of honeysuckle and orange flowers with which she loved to flavour her tea. By royal command A-lu-te was given of this special brew. The court ladies remained outside the summer house where their own eunuchs prepared tea for them of a quality less fine.

"Wang-ti," said the Empress Dowager, "I find pleasure in your company; you are merry and are not stupid. I will see whether the day you came to the palace is not a most auspicious

one. Have the book read," she said turning to Li, "and bring the answer to me here immediately."

With an inscrutable look upon his face, the Chief Eunuch went to do her bidding. No sooner had he gone than A-lu-te, buoyed by a hope rendered overconfident because of the favourable impression she had made and because the "Great Old Buddha" did in sooth look that day like the "Benign Mother" her people affectionately called her, determined to try and obtain by frank and open-hearted appeal that which she had thought only to obtain by stratagem and fraud. She threw herself suddenly at the feet of the Empress Dowager and knocked her head repeatedly on the ground.

"Tut, tut, girl, you needn't break your head thanking me for the tea. Get up."

"Grant, Old Ancestor, the prayer of your handmaiden," said A-lu-te, her voice quivering with fear of failure, and hope of success. She was risking all at one stroke. If she failed, Fen-Sha's fate was irrevocably sealed. That she was imminently endangering her own life she knew well, but to this she had become accustomed. Had she not risked her life many times over from the moment she set foot in the Summer Palace, and even earlier in Peking, where she posed as the niece—dead these two years or more—of the Lady Yin?

"What is it you want?" asked the Empress Dowager with a smile. She had a charming

smile of great sweetness. "Is it a new gown for the summer more handsome than any at Court save mine? Or jewels? For in sooth you seem to have none. Shall it be pearl earrings, or a bracelet of green jade from Khoten? Speak, perhaps it will pleasure me to grant your prayer."

A-lu-te clasped her hands in supplication. "It is not gowns or jewels your slave desires, it is—" her voice faltered an instant, then she went bravely on, "it is the life of one who, innocent of crime, is doomed to die."

Tzū Hsi frowned. At this moment the Chief Eunuch entered, silent-footed, unobserved. When he saw A-lu-te on the ground in the attitude of one kowtowing, not in deference or gratitude, but as one beseeching, he stopped to listen. A look of intense satisfaction came into his face, as he heard her low-spoken words. He was a clever man and an exceedingly cunning one. The reason of the astounding temerity the girl displayed that morning when she defied his authority to eject her from the Palace was clear to him now. She hoped to save the life of someone dear to her. Who was it? Not her father, for Li knew well that the brother-in-law of Lord Yin was not threatened with danger from the wrath of the Throne, nor yet any of his family. Had the girl a lover? Yes! That was it! What audacity to present herself as eligible to enter the harem of the Solitary One! She herself had now given him the rope with which to hang her. Well, he would

use it, and quickly, and the knot around her throat he would tie exceeding tight. He looked at her with a mocking smile.

Softly approaching the Empress Dowager he whispered in her ear: "It appears, Old Buddha, that now we have the true reason why this young lady so ardently desired to grace the court with her presence."

The frown on Tzŭ Hsi's face deepened. She did not reply to the eunuch, but his words made the impression he desired on her mind. Her anger grew against this girl whose apparent happiness and gaiety had ozonized the stale atmosphere of her court. Was it true that this lovely young creature had sought to remain in the Palace for reasons other than the honour and joy of being near the Presence? Tzŭ Hsi's vanity was wounded. Her voice was harsh when she spoke again: "What nonsense is this? What have you to do with the decrees of my law courts? If one of my subjects is condemned to die, be assured of the fact that he deserves his fate and that it ill becomes an ignorant girl like you to question the justice or plead the cause of such a one. Moreover know that I allow no one other than officials, or those summoned by me for the purpose, to broach questions of state or law."

Too late A-lu-te realized her mistake. It seemed to her that a grave had opened at her feet, a grave of her own digging, into which she had plunged Fen-Sha and into which she herself

was falling. Again the Empress Dowager spoke. Her voice was, if possible, more imperious, more harsh than before.

"Who is this man for whose life you have the presumption to plead?"

There are some natures who from an overpowering consciousness that their opponent is more powerful, stronger than they, become crushed, spiritless, frightened. A-lu-te's nature was not one of these. Love made her strong. Her mind worked with lightning rapidity. Only quick thought, ready wit could save her now.

"Old Ancestor, it is not a man your slave pleads for—it is her dog."

The Empress Dowager stared a moment in blank amazement—then broke into a silvery peal of laughter. "Your dog!" she cried. "Well, and why must your dog die? Has he snapped at the official legs of one of my magistrates? Is that it?"

"No, your Majesty. It is that he is far from his mistress, your handmaiden, and will die sorrowing for her."

"That is not the habit of animals, whether man or dog," replied Tzū Hsi emphatically. "In the Palace I permit only my own special breed of dogs. I will give you Cha's brother; his hair is not as long and silky as Cha's, but for all that he is a handsome creature."

A-lu-te drew a deep breath. For the moment at least, the danger was past. She kowtowed

again, this time to express gratitude for the gift she was to receive. Then she rose staggering to her feet. Her escape had been narrow; the strain of it left her weak. She was conscious that the Chief Eunuch was watching her closely. She felt instinctively that he at least had not been deceived by her answer.

A breeze had sprung up. The blossoms on the mimosa trees moved gently to and fro like dainty pink birds swaying on the branches. Far below, silvery ripples ruffled the smooth surface of the lake, the lotus-flowers nodded their fragrant little heads.

"How beautiful it is," sighed the Empress Dowager. "I have often wondered which hour in the twenty-four nature is her loveliest. I have watched her in all of them; in the early morning, at midday, in the long dreamy afternoons, in the evenings, and in the wonderful hours of the starry night, and never, never can I decide when her beauty is supreme."

Suddenly she remembered the commission she had given the Chief Eunuch.

"What says the book?" she asked.

"What your slave read is best said to your Majesty's ear alone," he replied significantly. She turned to A-lu-te, "You can join the other ladies. Tell them to note the beauties of nature and cease discussing their clothes, or tea-house gossip brought by eunuchs to the Palace."

A-lu-te withdrew. Her heart was heavy with

foreboding. She feared the Chief Eunuch at that moment more than she had feared the Empress Dowager's frown.

When she had gone, Tzŭ Hsi said sharply: "Out with it—what said the book?"

"Old Buddha, the news is bad. The seventh of this moon—which is the day she came to the Palace—trouble begins for you."

Clever woman though she was, Tzŭ Hsi was grossly superstitious. Belief in omens, in prophecies was deep-rooted in her character and played an incredibly important part in forming her opinions, in regulating the actions of her public and private life. She was in fact as grossly superstitious as the most ignorant coolie in the Empire, in spite of her undoubted intelligence, her profound acquaintance with Chinese Classics and Histories. She seldom questioned the integrity of signs and omens, and she habitually consulted her book not only for lucky days, but for propitious hours in the day.

The Chief Eunuch's report both amazed and troubled her. She rose abruptly. "My chair," she commanded.

This time A-lu-te was not invited into the royal barge. The girl's anxiety and fear increased momentarily. What had the Chief Eunuch told the Empress Dowager? Perhaps he had discovered her identity! But she did not entertain the thought long, for she was well aware that the Great Old Buddha's rage would have fallen

upon her immediately. The court ladies, quick to note the slightest change in the royal countenance, thought they saw A-lu-te's star rapidly descending. They moved away from her, gathering in small groups to whisper and titter, while she sat apart a prey to anxious thoughts and conjectures. She was not entirely alone however. Lady Chou-Chau remained beside her. When they landed, A-lu-te hoped ardently that she would be summoned to approach the Empress Dowager again, to entertain her with song and story, or lively conversation.

But no summons came, and she was allowed to follow unnoticed in the rear of the procession. Later in the day she accompanied the Court to the theatre and remained long hours scarcely seeing or hearing the eunuch actors who were performing one of the numerous plays which the Empress Dowager amused herself writing in leisure hours.

That evening when she returned to her room, she found a small fluffy black and white object curled up on a chair. It was Cha's brother, the gift of the Empress Dowager. The little creature stuck out its soft moist tongue and gently licked her hand. A-lu-te felt comforted, for she could not but think that had the Empress Dowager been angry the dog would not have been sent to her. She felt tired yet had no thought of sleep. She sank on her knees and bowing her head to the floor began to pray.

"Oh you, you nameless One, you God of the foreigners, help me, A-lu-te; for Buddha hears me not. With bent body, with lowered eyes, humbly, humbly I bring my prayers to you. I will burn incense and candles in your temples at this very hour, every month of every year I live, if you listen to me now. Save Fen-Sha, condemned to die the lingering death. O you God of the foreigners, I kowtow to you. I promise sacrifices to you, wine, cakes, aye, even sheep and bullock, reverently, reverently I promise. Save Fen-Sha, save Fen-Sha, save Fen-Sha!"

The night was far spent and still A-lu-te offered up her frenzied prayers, bowing to the ground unceasingly, calling on the God of the foreigner. An hour before dawn, she crept exhausted to her K'ang.

CHAPTER XI

THE DEATH SENTENCE

It was four when S'ang roused her. "At the hour of the tiger you must be in attendance on Lao Fo Yeh. It is time to make ready; I have brought tea," and he placed a tray on a lacquer table.

A-lu-te drank the tea, then made her toilet. A fresh coating of paint disguised the pallor of her skin and the dark hollows beneath her tired eyes.

"God give you a good day," said S'ang, as she left the pavilion.

The words produced a certain comforting impression on her. She found the court ladies already assembled on the marble-paved veranda of the imperial pavilion. The Empress Dowager was still sleeping. The court ladies had few duties they disliked more than waking the Old Buddha. It was with something of malicious satisfaction that they informed A-lu-te she had been assigned to perform this disagreeable task.

She entered the bedroom. Tzŭ Hsi was lying with her face turned to the wall.

"Old Ancestor," said A-lu-te, "it is the hour of the hare."

No sound came from the bed to indicate that she had been heard. A-lut-e raised her voice: "Old Ancestor, it is the hour of the hare." Still no reply. Again A-lu-te spoke and louder: "Old Ancestor, it is——"

"Be quiet. Go away. How many times do you intend to repeat the same thing? You are destitute of originality and have no sense."

The Empress Dowager made this speech without moving.

"Pull in your head, or stick it out, off it must come," murmured A-lu-te demurely. It was a popular Chinese proverb, meaning that when you are summoned before one in authority, whether you are guilty or innocent of wrongdoing, the result will be equally disastrous for you. The Empress Dowager turned abruptly: "Humph, it's you, is it!" she said. "I might have known as much. So you think it is a difficult task to wake me and please me at the same time? Well, I won't take your head off this morning, it's too pretty."

She was wide awake now. The more she saw of A-lu-te, the more irresistibly she felt attracted towards her. She was prepared for once to believe the book mistaken. Yesterday she had ordered the horoscope drawn of the maiden Wang-ti, and there had been nothing to indicate that the star of Wang-ti came in any way in conjunction with the star of the Benign Mother. She remembered this with satisfaction as she sat up in bed and ate

the lotus-root porridge a slave girl brought her. Then she proceeded to the serious business of her toilet. When the Empress Dowager awakened in a good humour, the entire Court was happy. Especially was this true of those whose duty compelled attendance in the imperial bedchamber, for there were mornings when it was impossible to please Tzŭ Hsi, mornings when the least carelessness, negligence, or inadvertencies were punished with severity, and when even the death penalty was inflicted on the offender. This had been the fate of a wretched eunuch who, new to his task, had, while making the Empress Dowager's coiffure, combed out two or three hairs, and failed to hide them up his sleeve, as his more strategic predecessor had invariably done. He was beaten to death by the savage order of the Chief Eunuch to whom the Empress Dowager complained that the fellow was wilfully awkward and had pulled out her tresses.

But when Tzŭ Hsi felt amiable, she was the most gentle of mistresses, the most charming of companions. Although she possessed an absolute lack of pity, or sympathy, yet, woman that she was, she had great need of tenderness, and such was her magnetism that she found this tenderness wherever she chose to seek it. She was fully cognizant of this fact and often declared that she could when she chose be like the golden orchid, love-exciting. On this particular morning she was amiable and gracious to everyone. She talked

gaily, while the *amahs* fastened the wide silk pantaloons at her ankles with rose-coloured ribbons, and slipped over the rose-silk shirt a short morning gown of soft crêpe embroidered with bamboo leaves.

"Wang-ti," she said, "you may attend me when I give audience this morning to the Senior Secretary of the Hing Pu" (the Board of Punishment). "I want you to see what a man looks like who possesses the miraculous faculty of obeying my orders with exactness and promptitude. When our official business is transacted, I will converse with him on the Classics that you may taste the flavour of his intelligence. He is not like some men I know who think to look wise by the simple process of rubbing their noses and who imagine they hoodwink me into believing them clever."

She was dusting her face with scented powder, having first washed it and sprayed it with a lotion of honey and white jasmine. Her complexion was clear, smooth, and soft as that of a child. A-lu-te stood beside her watching her.

"How beautiful your Majesty is!" exclaimed the girl impulsively. Tzŭ Hsi, who loved compliments when they were given spontaneously and detested them when they were not, looked pleased.

"Am I? Well, that is as it should be. Every woman, whether young or old should make herself beautiful. It is not a question of features, but of attention to the details of her toilet, and to the cultivation of gracious manners and the desire to

please for the sake of pleasing. This is the recipe I have followed myself and have given to all the ladies at Court. Those who have sense profit by it, but the majority are too stupid to do so."

She changed her short morning gown for an elaborate garment of yellow silk gauze embroidered with peonies and precious stones. Then she went to the Throne Room and sat behind a magnificent teakwood screen inlaid with lapis-lazuli. The Senior Secretary of the Hing Pu was announced. On entering the room, the Senior Secretary, who was an old man, performed the ceremony of the Kwei-Kiu-Kao, that is thrice kneeling, and nine times bowing the head to the ground. He advanced on his knees (he had taken the precaution of heavily padding them) to the first row of cushions on the marble floor and waited for the Empress Dowager to speak.

"When did you return to Peking?" she asked from behind the suspended curtain.

"Late yesterday afternoon."

"Have you entirely recovered from the malady in your left knee?"

"Not entirely, it still causes me pain."

"Does that posture increase your pain?"

"Yes, it increases it."

"Have all the members of the Kao-lao-hui club been arrested?"

"Not all, four made their escape."

"That is bad. They must be found and dealt with summarily. All such organizations must be

strangled in their inceptions before they can do harm. Their principles are pernicious and contrary to Chinese law. Did you see the man Fen-Sha, the organizer of these clubs?"

"Yes. The magistrate in Tientsin had him brought before me. The villain showed no signs of repentance. He had the temerity to say he had done no wrong, that his arrest was unjustifiable, and that the time was not far distant when every man in China would think as he did."

"He is an arch-traitor. He spends his life promoting agitation, sowing seeds of dissension over all the land. You know, do you not, that he was captured on the banks of the Pei-ho where he was disguised as a travelling tinker—talking to the villagers of liberty?"

"Yes, I know that."

"What means this miserable organizer of rebellion by 'liberty'? Does a dutiful son desire to sever the bonds that bind him to his father, or a good wife to refuse obedience to her husband and mother-in-law? The people are the children of their sovereign who is their father and their mother, and who knows what is good and what is bad for them. Did this Fen-Sha admit he instigated Tsing to memorialize the Throne, denouncing in unseemly language my loyal servant and Chief Eunuch?"

"Yes, he admitted it. But he denied that he was the author of those scurrilous attacks on your Majesty printed on placards and posted on the

city walls of the south. But the magistrate is of the opinion that he wrote them."

"What said these placards?"

"Most illustrious Queen, Buddha pronounced these words: 'The wicked man who persecutes the good man is like a madman who throwing back his head spits against heaven; his spittle, incapable of sullyng heaven, merely falls back upon himself.'"

"I know what Buddha has said quite as well as you. You need not waste your breath and my time in telling me. What said the placards?"

"The author of the placards compared the life of her sacred Majesty to the lives of Kieh and Mi-h'e of the Hia dynasty."

These rulers are notorious in Chinese annals for cruelty and licentiousness.

"Ha! He did that?" Tzŭ Hsi's voice trembled with rage. "What depths of unthinkable audacity! The madman's tongue shall be torn from its root for such unbridled license. What else said he?"

"That like Chau-sin her Majesty would not hesitate to command the heart of a fearless, conscientious censor plucked out and brought to her, to see wherein it differed from the cowardly sycophants who habitually court her favour."

Tzŭ Hsi's passion was frightful to witness; it was like a tempestuous whirlwind through which her eyes gleamed like bolts of lightning. Her voice rose to a shrill ear-splitting shriek. "When

is the execution of this dog Fen-Sha ordered to take place?"

"On the fifteenth of this moon, a week from yesterday."

"Let it be accomplished immediately. You are to hasten to Tientsin. The hour of your arrival you are to present my decree and you are to superintend his death yourself. I order the slicing process to be lingeringly prolonged; his ankles to be crushed in a vice, his thigh-bones broken, his eyelids cut off and clipped into small fragments, and I forbid the transmigration of his soul, which is to remain in a state of suspended animation for all time."

She wrote the fatal decree with vermilion ink on flowered paper.

"My seal!" she commanded. The Chief Eunuch opened a beautiful chased gold box wherein lay the Empress Dowager's seal of state. The document was stamped and the eunuch received it kneeling. He in turn handed it to the Senior Secretary, who kowtowed when he took it.

"You are dismissed. Hasten," said Tzŭ Hsi.

Three times the Senior Secretary essayed to rise from his knees, but the pain overpowered him and three times he sank down again.

"Let eunuchs assist him," said the Empress Dowager.

The old man was raised and leaning heavily on the arms of the eunuchs he limped from the Throne Room. Outside the eunuchs heard him

murmur, "The leaves of my life-tree are falling rapidly—this journey to Tientsin will shake the last remaining ones down. But they will not fall till I have fulfilled her Majesty's commands."

A-lu-te had listened to this audience with heart palpitating so loudly, she thought all must hear it throb. Beneath the paint on her face she had grown white as the marble floor she stood upon. A frenzy of despair seized her. She told herself that it was impossible now to save Fen-Sha. The Senior Secretary would start for Tientsin that very day. Had the Great Old Ancestor not told her he possessed the miraculous faculty of executing her orders promptly and with exactitude? Because he was an old man, he would no doubt take the water road to Tientsin, for it was easier though longer than the land road. Yet even so, with favourable conditions the boats could make the journey down the river in two days. Fen-Sha was doomed. She could not think clearly because of the horror which oppressed her. Her knees shook; she trembled as with a sickness. She did not know that the Chief Eunuch, suddenly aware of her agitation, was whispering to the Empress Dowager, till the latter turned and stared at her. With a supreme effort she sought to control her trembling. The effort was vain; her teeth chattered in her head.

"What ails you?" asked the Empress Dowager.

Her rage, fierce and deadly while it lasted, was already spent.

"A sickness has come upon me," replied A-lu-te in a voice scarcely audible.

"A sickness!" exclaimed the Empress Dowager, a note of genuine anxiety in her tones. "You remember the horoscope, Li? She is delicate. We must watch carefully over her lest—" She did not finish the sentence but looked significantly at the Chief Eunuch. He nodded. The maiden Wang-ti's horoscope had foretold her early death; the exact reading had been: "Her destiny not long lived; her sands soon exhausted."

Tzŭ Hsi was determined to do all within her power to prolong the life of this girl who attracted her so strongly. "Let the doctors be summoned," she ordered.

In a few minutes the court physicians appeared. Like the scholars in the Palace, they too were eunuchs. Told by the Empress Dowager to discover and cure the particular sickness which had seized upon A-lu-te, they examined her tongue and felt the pulse of each wrist. By the beating of the pulse of the left wrist, the state of the heart was determined, while the right pulse indicated the condition of the liver and lungs. They announced their opinion that the noble malady was an affection of the heart and that to restore equilibrium and harmony to the system the patient must swallow pills of powdered staghorn which they would prepare and that in the meantime she must sleep three consecutive hours.

The Empress Dowager excused A-lu-te from

further attendance upon her that morning and cautioned her to obey the physicians by sleeping the prescribed number of hours.

In the seclusion and quiet of her room A-lu-te strove with all her force to compel her mind to think calmly and to formulate some plan by which she could still save Fen-Sha. But for a long time she could not quiet herself. She pressed her hands to her temples, repeating despairingly: "Too late, too late, I cannot save him now." Drops of sweat covered her forehead. She pictured Fen-Sha dragged from his prison to the place of execution, she saw his eyelids cut off and with awful slowness his body hacked into unrecognizable pieces. The scene was horribly vivid. A black mist covered her eyes; she felt faint and stretched out her hand to steady herself. Her fingers came in contact with the book S'ang had given her—the book of rites of the foreigners which they called the Bible. Suddenly she recalled the words S'ang had read to her: "Ask and ye shall receive." Her faintness left her; she became transported with rage. She seized the Bible and flung it on the floor and stamped upon it. The God of the foreigners had lied to her. She had believed in him and he had deceived her. He was worse than Buddha, a thousand, a million times worse. Buddha gave no promises and if he had not helped her to rescue Fen-Sha and had turned a deaf ear to her pleading, he at least had not mocked her with false hopes. She stooped, picked up the Bible, and flung it with

all her force the length of the room. It fell behind the teakwood teapoy. Her face was distorted with passion. An outside door of the pavilion opened; footsteps approached the room. A-lu-te heard nothing, saw nothing, the frenzy of her rage was strong upon her. The curtains were softly drawn aside and the ugly head of the Chief Eunuch appeared in the opening. He took one step into the room, and stopped; the expression of amazement on his face was swiftly followed by one of comprehension and of fear.

A-lu-te, rage-smitten, oblivious of everything but her own anger, was pacing the room like a tigress. So had the Old Buddha looked that very morning, so did she look every time rage took possession of her. The resemblance was striking, unmistakable, why had he not seen it before? He knew now why his instinct had warned him not to admit this girl into the Palace! Softly he dropped the curtains and with stealthy step left the pavilion. He did not choose that she should know he had been there. He shut himself up in his own handsome apartments.

He felt the need of thinking over many things.

CHAPTER XII

THE PUPPET EMPEROR APPEARS

THE Emperor Kuang Hsü left his capital to go to the Summer Palace. He was late. If his august aunt, the Empress Dowager, chanced to notice this fact, his weekly visit of subjugation—for it was nothing less—would be made more unpleasant for him than usual. Nominally he had now been ruler of China for a year. He held audiences every morning; the ministers of state received his commands and obeyed them too—if they did not conflict with those of the Empress Dowager; he wrote decrees which were published—after the Empress Dowager had passed upon them; he made officials, and the Empress Dowager unmade them when the mood seized her. He was a puppet ruler, and he knew it. The thought rankled so steadily within him it became at times like the fierce stinging of wasps and caused those violent outbursts of temper which his imperial aunt pretended so greatly to deprecate. Yet she herself possessed more than her full share of the Yehonole family temper. Moreover her paroxysms of anger invariably led to crime, while his

harmed no one but himself. But she knew how to cast a mantel of decent fiction over her darkest deeds and the people gladly shut their eyes and swallowed the tale. They did not believe she had encouraged her own son in vicious living to undermine his health in order that she might continue to rule in his stead; nor that she had caused the death of his pregnant wife. When rumours reached them of her fierce and savage temper, they merely said: "Yes, the Benign Mother is apt at times to be a little choleric; she has her weaknesses, being human, but her heart is good." Kuang Hsü knew well what they said of him, their puppet Emperor. Did they not believe the carefully spread reports of Tzŭ Hsi's eunuchs that his mind was as feeble as his body? Some day they would know the truth; some day he would rule his Empire in reality. But the time was not yet come when he could break the fetters which bound him to the Summer Palace. He was surrounded by the "rats and foxes" which infested the Yellow City—the very walls of his private palace were honeycombed with them—all creatures of his aunt and her horrid henchman, Li. Even his consort the young Empress acted as a spy upon him, reporting to the Empress Dowager every word and look he gave in her presence. He would like to relegate her to the "cold palace" where the wives of former emperors were imprisoned when their conduct merited punishment, or they had ceased to please. How ugly she was,

with her stooped shoulders and narrow chest and her black teeth. It was a relief to turn from her to the smiling countenances of some of his concubines, even though their mother-wit was less than mediocre.

As Kuang Hsü knelt outwardly humbly before the inner gate of the Summer Palace that morning, his whole soul was in revolt. The surging passion in his veins made him breathe hard. He felt that his presence there, awaiting the pleasure of the Chief Eunuch to admit him, was an indignity too great to be borne. Last week Li had kept him kneeling at the gate one half hour before he announced his presence to the Empress Dowager. Must he again submit to such treatment from this vile, base-born creature? It was good to remember that he once had this dog of a eunuch flogged. That was long ago. Li had failed publicly in respect to him and he had ordered his eunuchs to seize him, strip him, and apply the big bamboo to his bare back till his flesh was raw. The fellow had howled with pain.

The young man smiled grimly as he recalled the scene. But since the flogging the Chief Eunuch had had his revenge many times over. He it was who a few days later had induced the Empress Dowager to order the decapitation of the eunuchs who had administered the beating, on accusation of stealing bolts of tribute silk from the palace warehouse. The charge was true, of course, for what eunuch did not take this "squeeze"? Yet

the Emperor had been powerless to save them and they had been replaced by the Chief Eunuch's own creatures. Every day his influence with the Empress Dowager grew. He had even induced her recently to disgrace an honest, brave official, and compel him to commit suicide, because he had memorialized the Throne concerning Li's iniquities. In all the history of the Empire never had eunuchs attained such power, displayed such barefaced effrontery as now—no, not even under the Ming dynasty, which owed its downfall and complete degeneracy to these sexless court menials. The wise K'ang Hsi had curtailed their privileges. The excellent rules of his reign were long maintained and these born sweepers of floors were for nearly two hundred years rendered innocuous. But gradually the evil grew again till now it had become monstrous. Well, he, the Emperor Kuang Hsü, would chase this vile brood of scorpions from the Palace soon.

Such were Kuang Hsü's thoughts as he knelt. A firm look appeared on his handsome young face and his delicate jaws closed with something like a snap. He had been kneeling ten minutes and still no one came to admit him. He rose abruptly and turning to his attendants, said: "Stay here. When the Chief Eunuch arrives, inform me. I shall be yonder." He indicated a court on the left, adjoining the one he was in. The eunuchs were filled with amazement. Such a proceeding was without precedence; it was an

unheard-of departure from etiquette. Yet among his servants were a few who, longing to see their lord the real master in the Empire, felt a keen satisfaction at his action; they pictured with unctious the Chief Eunuch's immense surprise when he came to admit the Emperor and discovered his absence. They watched the slight, elegant figure of their young sovereign disappear in the adjoining court. Kuang Hsü's knees were sore and his back ached. He gnawed his lip with vexation that he should have so little strength to bear physical fatigue.

The court he entered was a large one and made by China's most expert landscape gardeners to represent, in miniature, mountains, valleys, and grass-grown plains. Red bridges spanned small streams and here and there were scattered memorial stones with verses cut upon them from the *Book of Odes*, or original lines from the poetic pens of former emperors.

Lost in gloomy thought Kuang Hsü wandered on till he came to a gate in the wall surrounding another court. The gate was small and evidently intended for the use of gardeners and workmen. It was partially ajar. The young man pushed it open with his foot and entered a garden which when a boy had been a favourite lounging place of his. Between two great cypress trees, near a lotus pond, he saw the figure of a woman. She was young and dressed in court costume. With quick steps she was pacing back and forth on the banks

of the pond. Now and again she stopped, wrung her hands wildly, and resumed her agitated walk. The Emperor approached her unobserved. He could hear her low dry sobs, the swift catching of her breath as if she were suffering sharp physical pain.

"Who are you?" he asked.

A-lu-te—for it was she—started violently at the sound of a voice when she had supposed herself alone. "One forsaken of the gods," she said. "Who are you?"

"The Solitary One!" The answer was given in a voice of infinite sadness.

"The Emperor!" exclaimed A-lu-te, and threw herself on the ground making obeisance.

"You need not do that!" he said gently. "I have not seen you before. How long have you been in the Palace?"

"Two days."

"Then you are one of the Manchu maidens whom the Empress Dowager selects for me. Are you crying because you do not want to be a woman in my palace?"

"No," replied A-lu-te, "that is not why I am crying, although I do not want to be a woman in your palace."

"Were you forced to come?" he continued his questions, looking at her gravely from under the drooping lids of his large brown eyes.

"No."

"You came of your own volition, then?"

"Yes."

"Yet you did not want to come? Explain yourself," he commanded quietly.

For a brief instant A-lu-te let her gaze rest on the handsome high-bred face, on the features cut as from a cameo, the broad intellectual brow, the sad kindly eye. Apparently she was satisfied with what she saw for she exclaimed with sudden, low vehemence: "Your Majesty, help, oh, help me!"

"Said the sun-baked paddy-field to the bone-dry stream," murmured Kuang Hsü with a mocking smile. "Come we will sit on yonder marble bench in the shade of the mimosa trees. So—that is better. What is your name?"

"A-lu-te"; the name burst from her impulsively, unguardedly.

"An ill-omened name. So was the Emperor Fung-Chih's widow called—she who was poisoned being pregnant. That is why I am now Emperor," he remarked calmly.

"Poisoned!" exclaimed A-lu-te. "Oh, your Majesty, is it true indeed!"

"As true as that some day the same fate awaits me."

There was no emotion in his voice; he might have been predicting a change in the weather.

"Who would dare?" asked A-lu-te, as she unconsciously drew nearer the young Emperor.

He smiled again that same little mocking smile but made no answer. Somehow A-lu-te understood.

"Oh!" she exclaimed passionately, "she is a wicked woman."

"Give scope to your tongue concerning yourself," commanded the Emperor.

There was that in the young man's face and manner which inspired confidence. A-lu-te instinctively felt that even if he did not help her, he would at least not betray her. She cast prudence to the winds and asked abruptly: "Your Majesty has heard of the reformer Fen-Sha?"

"I have heard of him. He is accused of casting aspersions on the character of the Empress Dowager."

"Those are base lies, told by his enemies to accomplish his death. Oh, your Majesty, he is a good man, a brave man, a scholar of high repute; the only crime he has been guilty of is the crime of loving too well his country."

"So have I thought," murmured Kuang Hsü, and aloud he asked: "What interest have you in him?"

"I am his betrothed," she answered with bowed head.

Kuang Hsü looked at her with sudden lively interest.

"Ah! that then is the reason of your coming to the Palace? You thought to obtain his pardon? You thought to save his life?"

"Yes," admitted A-lu-te in a low voice. She slipped to the ground on her knees: "Oh, save him, save him, your Majesty!" she cried.

"You are asking the impossible. He whom the

Empress Dowager condemns to die is beyond saving by the gods themselves."

"By the gods, perhaps. But you are the Emperor. You need but write a line and Fen-Sha will be released from prison."

"A dozen lines from me will not serve to countermand one order from the Empress Dowager. No, not if I wrote in vermilion ink, sealed the papers with my private seal, and dispatched them in all haste with an arrow messenger. Such is the power of the Son of Heaven on his throne!"

Into his arrogant young face came a look of intense bitterness. For a moment he appeared to have forgotten the sobbing girl at his feet. Then his eyes rested on her again.

"Rise," he said kindly, "and listen. I would like this man Fen-Sha to live; China needs all the educated, progressive, thinking young men she has. But I can do nothing for him. He is doomed to die. Not even a second decree written by the Empress Dowager herself can save him, unless she affix to it her private seal by which alone she can annul her previous commands."

Slowly A-lu-te rose to her feet. A sudden thought, like a flash of lightning, illuminated the darkness of her brain.

"Where does she keep this seal?" she asked

The Emperor shot a penetrating look at her, and answered with studied carelessness: "The seal is in a jade ring which never leaves the forefinger of her right hand, day or night."

For a moment a deep silence reigned between them.

"Wan Sway Yeh" (Lord of Ten Thousand Years), said A-lu-te solemnly, "if Fen-Sha is saved, he will devote his life to your service, he will be your slave, your faithful dog."

"I have told you I cannot help him."

There was something significant in A-lu-te's smile, as he made this declaration.

"You mean you would dare—" he did not complete the sentence but added abruptly: "You are preparing your own death."

"It may be so," she answered quietly.

"Do you care as much as that for him?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Even if you should succeed—and nothing is more improbable—you can never see him again. You belong to the Palace."

"It is true. But the knowledge that he lives will be my consolation and in time my happiness."

The Emperor shook his head incredulously. "You mistake yourself. Women are not made that way. The philosopher Chawng-tze once observed a widow who had been an exemplary and devoted wife, fanning the earth over her husband's grave. He inquired of her the reason for such a strange proceeding. Whereupon she told him that she had promised her husband on his death-bed not to marry before the earth of his grave was perfectly dry. 'And now,' she added, 'as it has

occurred to me that the surface of the ground, which has been newly tempered, would not soon dry, I thought I would just fan it a little.'"

Kuang Hsü's face had an expression of captivating mischief as he told this story. "That woman was typical," he said. A-lu-te shook her head. "I do not know how other women love. I know only how I love. If Fen-Sha dies, on that day I die too."

Again Kuang Hsü looked at her curiously.

"Many women have loved me, but not like that," he said. "It is true I care little for them. I would give all the women in my palace for the friendship of a man, young like myself, a man who would give me the companionship I have never had, the sympathy I have never known, the help I have never found, for the furtherance of my hopes, my plans for an enlightened China. I am alone in my hopes, alone in my strivings, alone in my fears. From my childhood I have had only women and eunuchs about me; there are days when I cannot bear the sight of them. I never see a man except in audience and even then he is old and senile, or past middle life, with his head in the S'ung dynasty and only his feet in the present, stultified, devoid of sense. In all the land here and beyond the seas, there is no lonelier man than I, nor one so friendless. Well am I named 'The Solitary One.' "

His gloomy young eyes were fixed before him on the ground.

"My heart grieves for your Majesty." There was sympathy in A-lu-te's tones and face, but Kuang-Hsü, who looked up when she first began to speak, recoiled from her with a shocked and startled expression, as if he unexpectedly had encountered an object of his deepest aversion.

"Who are you?" he demanded hoarsely.

It was A-lu-te who now looked alarmed.

"A-lu-te," she murmured in frightened tones.

"What is your *ju ming*" (milk name). "What is your father's name? Who is your mother?"

"My father's name?" she faltered. "My mother? I do not know; I am the adopted child of Marquis Tsing."

"Lord of Ten Thousand Years, your slaves seek you."

The loud cries reached them from the adjoining court.

"Go, make haste. You must not be seen here," exclaimed Kuang Hsü.

He seemed ashamed of his sudden harshness, for he added hastily: "For a moment you reminded me of one whom I have cause to greatly distrust and dislike; the resemblance was imaginary, I no longer see it. Go."

A-lu-te fled swiftly along the path bordering the lotus-pond and slipping behind a summer-house at the farther end made her way unobserved to the terraced court of her own pavilion.

Kuang Hsü in the meanwhile went slowly back to meet his anxious servants. "The Chief Eunuch

has come!" they gasped, prostrating themselves; "your slaves have been seeking your Majesty everywhere!"

He passed them without replying. When he reached the inner gate where he had knelt while his presence was announced to the Empress Dowager, he found it tightly closed again and the Chief Eunuch gone. The Emperor bit his lips in anger. He unfastened from his belt a handsome, embroidered, heavily filled purse and handing it to one of his attendants, said: "Pay your way in. Seek the Chief Eunuch and present him with this purse. Return swiftly."

Then he knelt again and this time waited until it should be the good pleasure of the most degraded of men to admit the Son of Heaven into his own domain. It was humiliating, but no other course was open to him. He dared not return to the Forbidden City without presenting himself to the Empress Dowager. She exacted from him strict compliance to those filial acts of homage which included kowtowing to her every fifth day at the Summer Palace. If he failed in these observances her anger would know no bounds. He did not wish to expose himself yet to the fatal danger of her unbridled passions. He had work to do for China. And so he waited, outwardly calm and patient, inwardly seething with hot resentment and taunting himself with his impotence to defy this woman and her eunuch. Ten minutes passed before the gates were thrown open. The

Chief Eunuch appeared; he kowtowed in a manner almost mocking.

"The scoundrel! the dog!" said the Emperor to himself, as he entered the court. A little later he was in the private palace of his august aunt. He was informed that her Majesty was at dinner. The hour was early, but Tzŭ Hsi had her meals served whenever and wherever she pleased. On the present occasion it was her caprice to eat in a pretty pavilion overlooking the lake. On the table before her were arranged rows of imperial yellow bowls ornamented with green dragons and with the character designating "long life." Eunuchs were removing with concerted movement golden covers from bowls, when the Emperor entered.

"All joy be with you," he said kowtowing.

The Empress Dowager acknowledged his salutation with perfunctory indifference.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No," replied the young man. He hoped she would permit him to depart. He detested few things more than eating with his aunt. Moreover, court etiquette required that he kneel during the entire meal and of kneeling he had already had more than sufficient.

"You had better eat, anyway," she said delicately lifting with gold chop-sticks bits of shark-fins from a clear soup. Tzŭ Hsi was something of a gourmand. On her table would be found every delicacy known to the Chinese culinary art.

She herself frequently invented choice dishes delectable to her palate. Today she was served with Peking ducks which had been fed upon wild garlic; chickens stuffed with pine needles to lend them a delicate flavour; bamboo shoots with chopped pork; pancakes made of mushrooms and pork; bread fried in sugar and moulded to represent butterflies, flowers, and dragons; many varieties of porridge; and all the fruits of the season.

The Emperor, at her insistence, tasted one or two of these dishes, then made no further pretence of eating.

Tzŭ Hsi, on the contrary, ate heartily and with great enjoyment.

"I hope," she said, hooking the jewelled butterfly attached to a silk embroidered napkin more securely into her collar, "I hope you and the young Empress have not been quarrelling again."

"No," replied her nephew.

He knew that she was kept informed by the young Empress herself of all that occurred between them and was quite as well aware as he that for a week past he had studiously avoided meeting or even seeing his first wife. Tzŭ Hsi, as was her custom, dropped the subject to revert to it later and took up another.

"That decree you wish to sign about toleration for the religion of the barbarians in our Empire and protecting their bonzes, is not good; it can only do harm. You had better leave the matter alone for the present."

Kuang Hsü's sensitive mouth suddenly became a straight line. For a moment he made no reply, then he said: "We are of the East, they are of the West. Is that any reason why intercourse between us should not be honourable and harmonious?"

"By all means let harmony exist between ourselves and the Western barbarians," said Tzŭ Hsi, impatiently, "but let them cease to urge our subjects to forget the religion of their forefathers and worship barbarian gods from which no good can emanate. This discussion has grown old; we will talk no more about it."

"The religions of the West have for their object the inculcation of virtue, they can do no harm," affirmed the Emperor, "and though our people be converted to these religions they continue to be Chinese subjects and to obey our laws."

Tzŭ Hsi stared in amazement at the young man who dared not only to pursue a conversation she had commanded should cease, but even to contradict her. She could not brook opposition from anyone, least of all from the puppet she had placed upon the throne.

"Do you remember whom you are addressing and to whom you owe your present position before the nation?" she asked bluntly. Her temper was rising.

"Yes! To your Majesty I owe everything and shall continue to owe everything even to my life," said the Emperor humbly. Tzŭ Hsi bent a prob-

ing look upon him as if she fain would read the very heart of him.

But the delicate patrician face before her showed immobile as marble.

"Do you permit me to revert to the subject?" he asked with quiet persistence.

"Speak then," she crossly consented.

"Confucius said: 'A state must first smite itself and then others will smite it. This is illustrated in the passage of the *Fâi Chiâ*, When Heaven sends down calamities it is still possible to escape them. When we occasion the calamities ourselves it is not possible any longer to live.'"

"To what is this display of erudition leading?" she asked curtly.

"To the thought, nay more, to the conviction that if we do not stop the frequent murders of foreign bonzes—missionaries they call them—we will bring down upon ourselves the revengeful anger of the great nations."

"The great nations!" she cried scornfully, "what are they? Long ago I was told by my Grand Councillors that the greatest of these so-called great nations are the English, a barbarian race, dwelling on a petty island beyond our Empire, a contemptible, mannerless, seafaring people, possessing no thought above bartering; a people who when they first made their appearance in China, we should have exterminated, as we would exterminate pestiferous insects. And the other nations are even more insignificant. Their petty

rulers send their doltish advisers to Peking, whom we do not deign to receive. These are the great nations, whose anger you fear!"

"It is true I fear their anger, which is cold-blooded and calculating. If these nations are insignificant, how comes it that they have compelled China to keep open her doors to their merchants; have wrung large sums of money from her for the killing of petty priests of their religion, have seized valuable territory from her on every trifling pretence, while they secretly laugh at her incapacity to defend herself against their aggressions. At any moment they can by united effort rend China asunder as wolves rend helpless sheep. If we continue to excite their anger they will do it."

His face was flushed; he spoke with vehemence foreign to his usual quiet self-contained manner.

Never since she sat upon the Dragon Throne had Tzŭ Hsi listened to such a speech. She was angry and amazed, and something else, a vague uneasiness, which was almost fear, assailed her; fear not for herself, but for this land of hers, which she ruled with autocratic finality, which she bled ruthlessly to satisfy her abnormal love of extravagance and the vicious craving for aggrandizement of her favourites, and yet which she loved with sincerity, after her own selfish fashion. Could this boy who never left the Forbidden City, unless to worship at the tombs of his ancestors, and at the altars of the Imperial Temples, or to

make obeisance to her in the Summer Palace, who was surrounded by her spies, could he foresee danger to China where she and the sage statesmen of the realm saw nothing? How was it possible? Yet he spoke with a conviction which had the force of prophecy.

"You are talking strange foolishness. Crush China! Rend her asunder as wolves rend helpless sheep! What effrontery of language is this! Who has dared fill your mind with these insane thoughts?"

"No one. I have spoken my own thoughts. I have followed the trend of China's history in the past and studiously read the books of the Western people which have been translated," he answered.

"Why do you demean yourself reading pernicious literature written by ignorant barbarians?"

"I read their books in order to master the methods which have enabled them to humiliate my country."

There was a silence during which the Empress Dowager seemed to be lost in uneasy reflections.

"What are these books?" she finally demanded.

"Histories for the most part—also geology, physiology, zoölogy, and astronomy," replied Kuang Hsü, quietly.

Again the Empress Dowager looked at him in quick amazement. More and more she was beginning to realize that she did not understand this weakling she had raised to the Dragon Throne. That he had scholarly tastes, was well acquainted

with the Classics, she knew, but that he should read books, the very names of which were unknown to her, and should deduce from them opinions, arrive at conclusions bearing on China's future, this seemed incredible to her. She could not withhold from him a certain measure of admiration. He was of her blood and though she bore him no love, she felt pride in the power of his intellect. Aunt and nephew represented the two opposing forces at work in China; the one narrowly conservative, determined to adhere closely to the century-old order of things; the other, liberal, progressive, deprecating the blind worship of petrifying Chinese customs and habits of thought which held his country enslaved.

Tzŭ Hsi did not know that in Kuang Hsü and in him alone lay the only hope of the Manchu dynasty. She more than any one realized the greatness of his intellect, but even she failed to grasp the fact that this Manchu princeling was a genius born to play the greatest part of any monarch who ever sat upon the Dragon Throne. As he knelt submissively before her, she told herself that he must be watched more closely in the Yellow City; that while his force lay in his extraordinary mental abilities, hers lay in her will, which was iron. As long as he was subservient to her, submissive to her leading strings, he could remain upon the throne, but when he ceased to be docile she would act.

In the meantime he must be kept physically

weak lest his will become strong as his bodily strength increased.

Today his conversation had made a deep impression upon her. She rose abruptly from the table. "Tell the court ladies they can come in and eat." She gave the order to a eunuch; then turning to the Emperor she said: "I have changed my mind about that decree. Sign it. You may go now."

Kuang Hsü kowtowed. He was leaving with glad, quick steps when she called to him: "I hear your reader is ill."

"Yes," admitted the young man reluctantly. He had tried to keep all knowledge of this fact from the Empress Dowager, aware that she would seize the opportunity of replacing the eunuch, whom she knew to be loyally attached to his master, with a creature of her own, on pretext of doing him, the Emperor, a favour.

He was not mistaken.

"I will give you one of my eunuchs, a good reader and familiar with the Classics. You see how carefully I consider your comfort," she added with a bland smile.

"Yes," said the Emperor, and forbore to thank her for the attention. She was about to comment on this neglect when Kuang Hsü suddenly asked: "Were you pleased with the ladies who presented themselves to enter the Palace of Feminine Tranquillity?"

Again the Empress Dowager experienced a

sharp, unpleasant surprise. Never before had the Emperor evinced the slightest interest in the Manchu maidens who came to be selected for concubines. What was the reason of this sudden change? A disquieting thought flashed through her mind. Had he seen Wang-ti? She remembered the Chief Eunuch had accused the girl on the day of her arrival in the Palace of seeking to show herself to the Emperor.

"Do you want to see the maidens?" she asked suavely.

"Yes," replied Kuang Hsü. He was perhaps not aware that a shade of eagerness had crept into his voice.

To the Chief Eunuch who stood near listening to the conversation, the Empress Dowager said: "Conduct the young ladies who are being instructed in court etiquette and feminine accomplishments to the Throne Room."

"Your Majesty commands that *all* the young ladies come?" asked the Chief Eunuch.

"Yes, all who are in the pavilion of the Purple Cloud," she returned.

The Chief Eunuch understood, as she intended he should understand, that the girl Wang-ti was not to be summoned. As Cobbler's Wax Li departed on his errand, he murmured: "The Old Buddha is discerning," and added sneeringly: "What has come over our Sir Puppet that he interests himself in the new candidates? Has he become a lover of women of a sudden?"

In the meanwhile the Empress Dowager and Kuang Hsü repaired to the Throne Room to await the arrival of the new concubines. Tzŭ Hsi seated herself by a small table and began throwing dice from a gold cup without bestowing further attention upon her nephew, who stood silently by watching her. She made three unlucky casts and frowned with annoyance. She seized the cup again, paused an instant before throwing the dice, while her bright eyes sought the jade Buddha in its gold shrine on an adjoining table. Her lips moved; then she made a cast. Six different numbers turned up. This was auspicious luck. Her face cleared and she became good humoured once more.

It was not long before the Chief Eunuch returned driving before him, like a flock of frightened geese, the young women. They made deep obeisance before their sovereign. They were commanded to pass slowly, one by one, in review before the young Emperor. Kuang Hsü scanned their faces slowly. The Empress Dowager and the Chief Eunuch watched him curiously. As the last maiden filed past, he turned away with an expression of chagrin and disappointment, an expression not lost upon two pairs of keen eyes.

"Are you satisfied?" inquired the Empress Dowager, pleasantly, when the young women were dismissed and again conducted to the pavilion.

Kuang Hsü made a careless gesture. "Yes," he replied.

After a momentary silence he said casually: "Only ten women came. I understood there were eleven who had been accepted by your Majesty."

"Then you understood wrong," returned the Empress Dowager dryly.

Before Kuang Hsü left the Summer Palace to return to the Forbidden City, he ordered one of his eunuchs to obtain a list of the names of the young Manchu maidens who were accepted as candidates for the imperial harem. There were only ten names on the list.

Tzŭ Hsi summoned the Chief Eunuch into her private apartment.

"What is it Old Buddha?" asked Cobbler's Wax Li, familiarly, seating himself. Forms and ceremonies were dropped when these two were alone together.

"The Emperor's reader is sick," she said.

"Did I not tell you on the first of the moon that he would fall sick?" he replied.

"The Emperor says he will soon be better," she continued.

"He will grow worse, not better," affirmed the eunuch calmly.

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure."

"The young Empress has told me that this eunuch reader is devoted to the Emperor. I do not wish the eunuchs to become devoted to him."

"Only a few are left in the Yellow City who

are not in our service. They will not remain there long," said Li significantly.

Tzŭ Hsi nodded, a comprehending gleam in her eyes.

"I wish to send the Emperor a good reader to replace the sick one. Whom do you suggest?"

Li considered a moment. "The servant S'ang; he is not stupid; he will serve us in the Yellow City."

"He is in attendance on the *hsiao Kuniang*" (the little girl); this was the pet name the Empress Dowager had bestowed upon A-lu-te.

"Let Ho-Shui wait upon her instead," said Li.

Ho-Shui was one of the followers and personal attendants of the Chief Eunuch, an ignorant fellow with a sly and brutal face. Li had his own reasons for desiring to make this change, reasons which for once had nothing to do with augmenting the army of spies surrounding the young Emperor in the Forbidden City.

The Empress Dowager agreed to this plan.

"Bring me my book; I will select a lucky day on which to make the change."

She studied the book attentively for a few minutes.

"Today," she said; "send S'ang to the Emperor and let Ho-Shui attend the 'little girl.'"

"Yes, I will do that," replied the Chief Eunuch. "And I will myself accompany S'ang to the Yellow City to see that he does not loiter unduly on the road."

Li was glad of an excuse to absent himself from Court for a day; he was anxious to interview Lord Yin at the earliest possible moment on the subject of his niece.

"That will not be necessary. A few hours more or less on the road does not matter. You need not go with him."

"As you will, Old Buddha," returned the Chief Eunuch with assumed indifference. After a moment's reflection, he said, "The tribute rice reached Tung-chow yesterday; it arrived in Peking today. I will go in to be present at the weighing; the steal was enormous last year. If these tribute shortages are not stopped, we will soon be without money sufficient to meet our daily expenses."

"Then I will levy on your little hoard," replied Tzŭ Hsi maliciously. "A few thousand shoes of Hupei silver will put an end to that difficulty."

The Chief Eunuch kept an impassive face; he knew she was referring to the "squeeze," more extortionate than any heretofore exacted, that he had wrung from the Hupei deputy who had come to the Palace in charge of the tribute from his province. She had heard of it through an enterprising eunuch, another of her favourites, who had hoped to ingratiate himself more with her and at the same time destroy Li. The attempt had been a failure, for Li, warned by one of his own creatures, had promptly forestalled the Old Buddha's anger by sharing with her his spoils,

and later had connived so successfully against his informer that he obtained her consent to have him beaten to death for some paltry offence. Li's enemies were short-lived; no one had ever opposed him with success and no opponent was too small to escape his vindictive passion. This fact being known at Court, none ventured to openly array themselves against him.

Tzŭ Hsi at times appeared to derive a malicious pleasure by threatening to despoil her Chief Eunuch of his ill-gotten wealth. But in the main she treated him with an affectionate familiarity she seldom deigned to bestow upon members of her own family. She knew well that Li, cruel, vindictive, corrupt though he was, yet was wholly devoted to her and served her with unswerving fidelity.

"All I have is yours to do with as you will, Old Buddha," he said. "I have in silver taels——"

"There, there, I care not what you have in silver taels—keep them, I do not need them. But you I do need, and today you must stay here. The measuring of the tribute rice can wait. I have been worried enough with affairs of state. I want a little relaxation and amusement. See to it!"

This was usually a congenial task to Li, but today it irked him exceedingly. With difficulty he restrained his impatience and forced his face to assume an expression of pleasure.

"Was the little girl sleeping quietly when you saw her?" asked the Empress Dowager abruptly.

"Yes," replied the Chief Eunuch and smiled grimly as he recalled the rage he had witnessed.

"By this time she will have recovered from her ailment. Tell her to attend me. I want everyone to have a happy day. Arrange the program carefully."

"I will see to it. But I fear that Lady Wang-ti will not be well enough to attend you. She looked white as she lay asleep, like one sick and exhausted." He wished to keep these two apart as much as possible, until he had determined upon the best method of getting rid of the girl, for if his embryonic suspicions concerning her proved to be correct, her presence in the Palace was a danger to his power greater than any he had yet encountered. "The physicians prescribed absolute quiet," he reminded her.

"For three hours. She has had them. Let her come and enjoy herself with the rest of the Court," retorted Tzŭ Hsi. She had no mind to forgo the pleasure which the society of A-lu-te afforded her.

"You did well not to permit the Emperor to see her," said Li calmly.

The Empress Dowager looked at him quickly. "You, too, have had that thought?" she asked.

"What thought, Old Buddha? Tell me what it is, I will have it forthwith," he answered gaily.

"Well, then, that she is too attractive, too intelligent to be risked near the Emperor"; she spoke slowly with puckered brows.

"And she is too well versed in history. She

might seek to emulate former beautiful concubines in the Palace. She has qualities of mind and character that render her a dangerous acquisition at Court. Take my advice, Old Buddha, before it is too late,—send her away.” The Chief Eunuch was desperately in earnest.

“No, I will not send her away. She defied you, therefore you hate her. That is your motive. Do not think to deceive me. Besides have I not said the Emperor is not to see her?”

The Chief Eunuch laughed. “After all we are of the same mind, Old Buddha, in regard to her. And now I go to arrange the festivities and to send S’ang to the Yellow City. I promise you a merry day. Let nothing trouble your serenity; your old watchdog Li is here to guard you.”

“Ride a fierce dog to catch a lame rabbit,” she mocked him good-naturedly.

It was perhaps an hour later when S’ang sought A-lu-te in her pavilion. With a rapt look shining in his eyes he told her that his prayers had been answered; that he had been made reader to the Emperor; that he would have daily intercourse with him and with that daily intercourse would come the opportunity to tell him of the Gospel which is for all mankind. “My message burns upon my lips until I speak it and he hears it. I go today.”

A-lu-te wondered miserably whether the God of the foreigners considered S’ang’s prayers more important than her own, that he should give him

aid and refuse it to her. But had he refused it? Tonight she would know! She ran to her dressing table and took from it a small lacquer box. She opened it, and emptying the contents, replaced them with a gold hairpin which she drew from the coils of her thick black hair. Then she hastily wrote a few words on a piece of paper and slipped it under the hairpin. She handed the box to the eunuch.

"S'ang," she said, "I am trusting you, even as you trusted me. Take this box and when you reach Peking, before you go to the Yellow City, seek out an old woman whose name I will tell you and where to find her. Give her this box and say it must be delivered in all haste to one whom she knows. Will you do this for me?"

"I will do it," promised S'ang. A-lu-te thereupon gave him the needful directions, repeating them twice over, that he make no mistake.

"May God have you in His keeping. Farewell," said S'ang and left the pavilion.

When he was gone, A-lu-te suddenly remembered that she had insulted this all-powerful God to whom S'ang prayed, and who was the God of the man upon whom she now depended for help and without whose aid she could not save Fen-Sha. She ran to the corner where she had flung the Bible and picked it up. She was relieved to find it had not been torn, or the binding injured by the furious stamping of her little feet. She laid the Bible on the K'ang and sinking on the floor

kowtowed reverently before it. Then she prayed that the foreigner would answer her urgent summons and wait for her by the green and yellow pagoda in the Wilderness Park near the western wall of the Summer Palace that night.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SUMMONS

A FEW hours after A-lu-te entrusted S'ang with her urgent message to Follingsbee, Betty was leisurely taking her morning tea and toast. Then she wrote in her journal.

Not everyone who keeps a journal is an egoist, though it may safely be assumed that every egoist keeps a journal. Two potent factors incite the journal habit in a young woman: a feeling of loneliness and one of happiness.

Betty was happy. Every morning when she wakened, every hour during the long pleasant days, every night of dinners, dances, and moonlight garden-parties happiness radiated from her. There is something infectious in happiness, and Betty soon became the most popular young woman in Peking. No entertainment was complete without the presence of her joyous, winsome person. Elderly diplomats and aspiring young ones vied with one another in seeking her company. Even middle-aged married ladies with youthful cavaliers in their train almost had it in their hearts to like her.

Betty described in her journal, with facile girlish pen, the social whirl in which she took so prominent a part. She drew word pictures, inaccurate for the most part, but never unkind, of the members of the legations and the Imperial Maritime Customs. And she devoted pages to Sir Robert Hart's dinner-dances in her honour and to his famous Chinese brass-band.

In Betty's journal, Follingsbee was mentioned only at the end of each day's entry, and in a manner meant to be casual and impersonal. Yet like a postscript in a woman's letter, his name constituted the most important part of her chronicles.

She now closed the book and sat with elbows resting on the table, her lips smiling and her eyes with a soft brightness in them, staring at the wall.

A childish voice angrily expostulating broke in upon her revery. The door was burst open and Tommy, the secretary's little boy, appeared. He and Betty were fast friends.

"The head-boy twied to keep me out, but I wouldn't let him, I *knowed* you would like to thee me," he declared.

"Of course," said Betty, tucking her journal carefully away.

"I know a thecret," he announced and added promptly: "Thall I tell it to you? Thall I?"

He earnestly hoped Betty would say "yes" and was dreadfully afraid she would say "no." The little missionary boy who came to play with him was not above that very meanness.

He was relieved when Betty answered: "Yes, dear, do tell me."

"I tan't," he replied grandly, preparing to thoroughly enjoy himself while Betty teased to be told. But that trying young lady only said: "Oh! can't you?"

"No, I tan't," Tommy repeated, wiggling on the edge of his chair, impatient for the fun to begin.

Betty, realizing that something was expected of her, asked: "Is it about your birthday?"

"Nop," shouted Tommy gleefully. "I'th about Mr. Follingsbee?"

"Mr. Follingsbee?" Betty's interest was not assumed now. She spoke eagerly. "What was it, Tommy? Won't you tell me?"

"Tan't," reiterated the small boy, his face beaming with delight, "it ith a thecret."

"Did Mr. Follingsbee tell you?"

"No! An old woman did tell me——"

"What old woman?"

"I don't know. I wath playing outside the Legation and she had yam-cakes to thell. She did give me two big cakes for nothing——"

"What did she tell you?" Betty asked.

But Tommy was not to be caught by such crude strategy.

"The thecret," he said, his tongue in his cheek and hugging his leg in an ecstasy of delight. The fun had finally begun.

"Now, Tommy, you are going to tell your Betty, aren't you?" she coaxed him softly, her slim young

arms about his neck. Few could have resisted such sweet wheedling, but Tommy was made of sterner stuff than most of his sex. "Nop!" he said with joyous firmness. "I arn't."

"Oh, very well," returned Betty. "If you won't tell me I shan't give you any candy. I bought a box at Kierulf's yesterday." Kierulf was a Dutchman; he kept one of the two foreign stores in Peking. These stores were allowed on sufferance by the government as a convenience to foreign residents, though the Chinese of wealth patronized them for watches, clocks, and mechanical toys.

Betty opened a box of French crystallized fruit and gave Tommy one tantalizing glimpse of its luscious contents.

"How many can I have?" he inquired, visibly weakening.

"Three large ones."

With small legs wide apart and earnest face, Tommy bent over the box. The business of selecting three large sugar plums was a serious one requiring time and careful thought. Finally he made his choice and popped the biggest sugar plum in his mouth.

"Now," said Betty, "what did the old woman tell you?"

Tommy, true to his bargain, proceeded to relate as lucidly as a sticky mass of sugar-fruit adhering to his sharp little teeth permitted, how the woman, after giving him the yam-cakes, had asked him if

he could keep a secret, and being assured that he could, had thrust into his hands a small package, at the same time exacting a promise from him not to show it to the servants but to hasten with it to the master of the American Legation and beg him to give it, without delay, to Mr. Follingsbee, she herself having forgotten where he lived.

"Did you give the package to father?" inquired Betty eagerly.

"Nop—I couldn't—cauth he went to the Yamen thith morning with the interpreter."

Tommy was always conversant with Legation affairs.

"What did you do with the package?" asked Betty anxiously.

"I dug a little hole under the bambooth in the flower-garden and played the package was a deader and I did bury it."

"Quick, Tommy! Show me exactly where you dug the hole," cried Betty.

Seizing the boy's hand she ran with him into the garden. A coolie, at work with hoe and rake by the very clump of bamboos Tommy had indicated, stooped suddenly and picked something up from the ground. The boy's quick eye saw the action. He broke from Betty and rushed at the man.

"Oh, you rabbit! you servant of hell!" shrieked Tommy in the vernacular; he spoke it as well as a Peking native and quite as forcibly. "Drop that! It's mine!"

The man grinned.

Tommy was a general favourite with the Legation servants.

When Betty came up, the coolie bent his knee to her, then shuffled off. But Tommy planted himself squarely before him.

"Your mother was a beggar, your father was a temple coolie, you are accursed of Buddha for digging in my ground and taking my property. Remove it from your dirty sleeve and give it to me."

Perhaps if Betty had not been there the man might laughingly have pushed Tommy aside and made off to the servant quarters with his find. But he now thrust his hand up the wide sleeve of his blue blouse and, drawing forth a torn, dirty package, handed it to the boy.

"Here it is, little master," he said. "I found it in a hole under the bamboos. Since it is yours why should I keep it?"

"Since it is mine you would of course not wish to keep it," returned Tommy politely. He was perfectly familiar with Chinese methods of face-saving. He trotted off with Betty to the Minister's office, tightly grasping his recovered property.

Mr. Danford had returned. He listened quietly while Tommy, urged by Betty, repeated his story.

Having told his tale he stepped grandly up to the Minister, the package in his outstretched hands. It slipped from his little fingers; a piece of paper fell out and a gold hairpin, such as native

women of wealth wear, rolled onto the floor. The Minister looked at this gold bauble surprised, displeased, even with anger. Had Follingsbee been mixed up in a vulgar intrigue with some Chinese woman who had taken this method of communicating with him?

But with a moment's reflection he dismissed the thought. He picked up the gold pin and returned it to its box.

"My boy," he said to Tommy, "you have done right to keep the promise you made to the old woman." Tommy flushed with pleasure, but his little face fell when the Minister added: "Only another time don't accept packages from street pedlars to deliver in the Legation. That's not your business."

He opened the door and shook hands with grave politeness with the child as he ushered him out.

No one observed a paper flutter from the office floor into the court.

Mr. Danford closed the door and returned to his desk where Betty was still standing immobile and silent. Before either of them spoke Tommy was back again clutching a piece of paper. This time he was accompanied by Mr. Collins, the Legation interpreter. The latter was smiling broadly.

"Tommy," he said, "has found a Chinese *billet-doux* in the court, which he insists upon giving you, sir. I read it under the impression that it pertained to official matters. This is what it

says: 'Remember your promise. Meet her who sends the gold hairpin, tonight at the hour of the Rat, by the green and yellow pagoda close to the western wall of the Wilderness Park.'" He laughed. "A Chinese love intrigue, an elopement—what? I wonder which of the Legation servants is the gay Lothario?"

The Minister did not echo his laugh. There was something in his countenance which caused the interpreter hastily to suppress his merriment.

He took the paper Tommy was stolidly holding out to him and thrust it back into the box with the gold hairpin. There came flooding to his mind certain rumours which had reached him concerning Follingsbee, rumours to which heretofore he had endeavoured to give scant heed and no credence. Now it was different; he had forced upon him the vulgar evidence of Follingsbee's low intrigues with native women. His disappointment in the young man's character was in proportion to the disgust he felt, which was very great.

"Do you want me this morning, sir?" inquired the interpreter.

"No—not till after tiffin," replied the Minister shortly.

"You are not going to the races, then?" The interpreter's tones conveyed aggrieved surprise.

Mr. Danford made an impatient movement. "I forgot for the moment—you need not return."

The interpreter bowed and left the office taking

Tommy with him in obedience to a gesture from his chief.

"Father," said Betty, with a queer little catch in her voice, "please send Foo-ling immediately with this box to Mr. Follingsbee."

The Minister wheeled about. "On my word, Betty, you surprise me"; his voice was biting. "Do you think I am here to forward love tokens from native women to young men, even when the latter happen to be Americans?"

"Then I will," declared Betty, reaching for the box. Without a word Mr. Danford swept the package into a drawer of his desk, turned the key, and dropped it in his vest-pocket.

"You won't let me have it? And you won't sent it to Jack?" cried Betty.

"Exactly—I won't let you have it and I won't send it to the young man you are pleased to call 'Jack.' You have stated the case correctly. By the way, how long is it since you have taken to calling Mr. Follingsbee 'Jack'?"

"Oh, quite a long time," returned Betty airily.

"You will oblige me by not doing so in the future." And the Minister bent over his desk again. It was an indication that as far as he was concerned, their conversation was concluded.

"I will call him anything you like, if you will only forward that box. You see, father," she continued hurriedly, fearing a second emphatic refusal, "I know all about the young woman who sent it. It is a very important message."

"You will be good enough to explain how it happens that you know anything concerning this matter, also from whom you acquired your information."

"Why from Jack—I mean Mr. Follingsbee, of course."

"Indeed! And what did he say?"

"I am sorry, father dear, but I can't tell you. I promised Ja—that is, I mean Mr. Follingsbee particularly desired that you should know nothing about it."

"And I particularly desire that from this day on you have absolutely no intercourse with Mr. Follingsbee. You are not to receive him when he calls; if he writes you are not to reply to his notes; if you meet him elsewhere you are to avoid speaking to him."

"Oh, father! Do you mean that?" cried Betty.

"Emphatically—yes," returned the Minister.

"But I must give him that message," she expostulated. She was very near to tears.

Mr. Danford made no reply.

"May I?" asked Betty with unaccustomed meekness.

"No."

Mr. Danford was the mildest, the most lenient of fathers. Betty had never encountered from him opposition to her smallest whims or wishes; but now she found herself suddenly confronting a new parent, one who was stern, inflexible, authoritative.

Silently she crossed the office and stood by the door leading into the drawing-room. Then she turned. Her face was pale and her lips trembled a little. "Father," she said slowly, "I intend to tell him about that message this afternoon at the races."

"You are at least frank. I will be equally so. If you disobey me in this matter, I will send you home to your Aunt Lavinia."

Betty gasped. She was prepared for much but not for this. To give up the gaieties, the happiness of her life in Peking, to bury herself in a dull, little Illinois village with her Aunt Lavinia—her love for this relative was of a very negative quality—and above all, to leave Follingsbee, filled her with dismay. She experienced, for the first time in her young life, a lively sense of awe of her father, together with a conviction that his threat was not an idle one.

She went to her own room, locked the door, and dropping in a chair, rested her chin on her hand and thought. At the end of ten minutes she had made up her mind. There was determination in the lines about her pretty mouth; but her eyes were misty with the expression of a child that knows it will be hurt.

She changed into her habit. A half-hour later the headboy announced the arrival of "five piecee gentlemen." They had come to ride with Betty to the races.

She found her father already mounted and wait-

ing when she appeared in the court with her escort. She avoided his gravely questioning glance and placing her small foot in the hand of a young Englishman sprang lightly into her saddle. Then laughing and chatting she led the way out of the Legation gates.

The race-course of the foreigners lay five miles from Peking in an easterly direction. On a slight elevation not far from the grand stand, a crowd of inquisitive Chinese had gathered to watch the sports of the foreigners.

The first secretary of one of the legations was strolling up and down the road with a suave smile and a horsewhip; he treated the gaping celestials indiscriminately to both when they ventured to intrude too near the forbidden precinct of the pavilion. The secretary was always polite, even when most cutting.

The pavilion was already crowded when our little calvacade arrived. No form of entertainment was more popular in society circles of the legations and Customs than the semi-annual Peking races. Gentlemen were their own jockeys, except in the last race when the *mafoos* were allowed to ride their masters' ponies trained by themselves.

Betty noted with mingled feelings of relief and disappointment that Follingsbee was not on the pavilion, nor was he among the men grouped close to the track.

Eight ponies were entered for the first race.

They were ridden by members of the English, French, and Russian legations and of the Imperial Maritime Customs. The riders were dressed in white jockey suits with sleeves and caps of brilliant colours.

On the pavilion, ladies, staid, elderly diplomats, and young men were all alike eagerly leaning forward to watch the start.

The first, second, third, and fourth races were run, and still Follingsbee did not appear. Tiffin was served in the large room of the pavilion. With the metallic click-click of busy knives and forks upon well-filled plates, came the sound of lively talk and laughter. Softly treading servants replenished the wine-glasses and healths were drunk and responded to.

The young Fourth Assistant B. of the Customs was called upon to answer a toast to the jockeys. He rose, a little less red than the sleeves of his coat, opened his mouth automatically several times, but when no words issued from his parted lips, he dropped into his seat again amidst a round of applause, bravos, and hear-hears!

A good-looking young German, blissfully content by reason of a fair-haired maiden beside him, and an elaborate tiffin within him, sighed volcanically: "*Mein Fräulein, ich liebe sie—Ach Gott, wie bin ich satt!*"

After tiffin the races were continued. It was late in the afternoon when Follingsbee on a foam-spattered horse dashed up. He flung the reins to

an attending *mafoo*, instructed him to give his animal a rub-down, then mounted the pavilion steps two at a time to join Betty.

Mr. Danford was discussing certain fine points in chess with the young Belgian Chargé d'Affaires—they were both enthusiasts in the game—and he failed to notice the arrival of Follingsbee. He had in fact ceased to expect him and had abated something of his vigilance.

Not so Betty. She had been straining her eyes for hours past scanning the white dusty road watching for him. Now she deliberately detached herself from the group of young men about her and met Follingsbee as he advanced, smiling, with outstretched hand, to greet her.

"Mr. Follingsbee!" she said in a low, hurried voice, "she has sent for you!"

He understood immediately. "Her message came here?" he exclaimed in surprise. "And I have been waiting all day in my rooms! I only left half an hour ago—I wanted to ride home with you. Where is the messenger?"

Without replying to his question Betty asked: "How does she sign her notes?"

"She doesn't sign them. She sends them with a gold or silver hairpin, such as Manchu women wear."

"I knew it! I knew it!" she cried in an excited but suppressed voice. "Father thinks it was a love-letter he was asked to forward and I couldn't tell him anything because I promised you not to.

He was very, very angry." Before Follingsbee could give expression to his amazement she plunged into the story of Tommy's package and how it occurred that the Minister had become acquainted with its contents.

Follingsbee stared aghast; he had not thought of the possibility of A-lu-te's message being delivered at the Legation or falling into the hands of the American Minister. That Mr. Danford should have placed the construction he did upon the note struck him like a blow in the face. He set his jaws hard, as if to suppress something seeking utterance.

He felt a small hand touch his arm, and looked into a pair of blue, anxious eyes.

"Go," said Betty. "You will be late."

He did not move. He had quick perceptions and was elusively conscious that Betty was keeping something back. His eyes were intent on hers and persistently held them.

"You have not told me all," he said.

"No," she was surprised into admitting.

Again Follingsbee understood.

"You were forbidden to speak to me!" he exclaimed.

She nodded her pretty head soberly.

"Betty," his voice was lowered to a whisper, "if I am not back in Peking within a week, tell your father everything. If I am back I will tell him myself and something more—that I love you, Betty! Whatever happens, dear heart, remember that I love you."

He crushed her hands in his, then turned and sprang down the pavilion steps, mounted his tired horse, and galloped off. He was suddenly seized with a nerve-racking fear that before he could reach his quarters, change into Chinese garb, and cover the fourteen miles to the Summer Palace, he would be too late to help A-lu-te. As his horse tore over the dusty highway, Mr. Danford chanced to look that way and saw him.

The next moment Betty's arm was linked in his. She said demurely to the Belgian Chargé d'Affaires: "I cannot lead the cotillion with you at the Bal Poudré next month after all. Father says I must return home to my Aunt Lavinia to complete my education."

It was Betty's way of informing her father that she had disobeyed but had not deceived him.

CHAPTER XIV

IMPERIAL PLEASURES

THE fête which the Chief Eunuch arranged for his royal mistress had never been equalled in brilliancy in the Summer Palace. Although apparently he had but a few hours in which to make the necessary arrangements, he had, as a matter of fact, completed his preparations long ago. It was one of his many clever characteristics that he prepared in advance entertainments of great splendour; then presented them to the Court in the guise of impromptu affairs and so excited the admiration, wonder, and delight of Tzŭ Hsi. The revenues of state, the appropriations for the navy, were expended on these festivals, but the powerful Chamberlain had no need to fear the royal displeasure at this misuse of public funds. On the contrary, after each fête, his influence increased with the Empress Dowager and he became more and more indispensable to his pleasure-loving mistress. On this occasion his arrangements had been made on a gigantic scale. The flower-filled courts were converted into great rooms; brilliantly painted poles, supporting transverse beams,

painted in the same design, surrounded each court and formed the support for roofs of matting, beautiful in texture and colour. Beyond these flowering semi-shaded rooms where fountains of perfumed water played and birds in silver cages trilled their pretty songs, a large oblong court had been converted into a crowded Peking street scene. There were gaily decked silk and embroidery shops, curio shops, pawnbrokers establishments, restaurants, tea-houses, wine-taverns. Eunuchs attired as merchants and clerks sat behind counters, or stood before the doors of these shops to entice the passer-by to enter. Pedlars and barbers wandered up and down the street, bawling their trade; waiters from restaurants shouted the names of savoury dishes ready to be served.

When the Empress Dowager, accompanied by her ladies, came upon this novel and animated scene, this replica of a crowded Peking business street (but without the unpleasant features of dirt and beggars), she was immensely entertained. She entered the silk and curio shops and drove hard bargains with the clerks. She purchased wonderful jade trees and jewelled ornaments from the silversmiths, and pawned them again gaily in the neighbouring pawn-shops. She sipped tea in the tea-houses and ate in the restaurants, then returned with renewed vigour to buying and bargaining in the shops. She was full of charming gaiety, and A-lu-te, whom she kept close by her, was as gay as she; the exuberance of their spirits

was infectious, everyone was laughing, joking, making merry. The hours sped rapidly. As the day advanced and before the new amusement had begun to pall Li begged the Empress Dowager to don the dress of Yan Ling, the Goddess of Mercy, and enter her chair, to go where another fête awaited her. By the marble terrace bordering the lake near the Temple of Ten Thousand Buddhas, a gigantic barge shaped like a phoenix was moored. Joined to this barge by cords of yellow silk were innumerable small boats in the form of butterflies, fishes, dragonflies, and swans, so ingeniously constructed, the rowers were concealed from view. When the Empress Dowager and her ladies were embarked, Li gave the signal to start; the invisible rowers plied their painted oars, the yellow ropes stretched, and the fleet slowly glided out into the lake. A blare of trumpets sounded from among the trees on the shore. Before the last echo died away, a thousand voices broke into a triumphant song of praise to the Goddess of Mercy. Floating towards the phoenix boat came two enormous pink lotus blossoms. The petals of the blossoms gradually unfolded, showing a beautiful boy and girl holding in their hands, the one a bottle of jade, the other a willow branch. The flowers slowly closed again; as they closed the boy and girl began to ascend until they seemed to be poised on the very tips of the lotus buds. When they were close to the phoenix boat, they stepped on board and ranged themselves on either side of the Em-

press Dowager. They represented the two attendants of the Goddess of Mercy who carry for her the jade bottle and willow branch with which she brings the dead to life again.

The scene pleased Tzŭ Hsi. It had been cleverly and artistically contrived and was subtly flattering to her overweening vanity.

She had scarcely time to extend a few words of praise to Li when a great raft, hidden beneath a mass of beautiful blooming roses, palms, and flowering trees, to represent a semi-tropical island, appeared. Pretty little thatched-roofed fishermen's huts showed amid the vines and trees. The Chief Eunuch requested the Empress Dowager to explore the island. In the huts fanciful costumes of fisher-folk were found.

The Empress Dowager selected one of these costumes and all the court ladies did likewise. Thus arrayed they went at Li's request to the shores of the island to fish.

He handed to each a fishing-rod; that of the Empress Dowager was made of gold with line of yellow silk and a golden hook. The court ladies were given rods of bamboo but every line different in colour.

Tzŭ Hsi was the first to try her luck. She cast her line into the lake. When she drew it up a beautiful necklace of rubies and sapphires hung from the hook. With an exclamation of delight—Tzŭ Hsi was extravagantly fond of jewels—she examined the treasure, then threw it over her

neck and swung her line again into the water, while she waited with eager expectancy for the premonitory jerk indicative of a nibble. This time she brought up a large golden oyster. She was at no pains to conceal her disappointment—the necklace had prepared her for something more artistic and of greater intrinsic value. The Chief Eunuch, noting her expression, smiled. “Will your Majesty deign to open the oyster?” he asked. In the golden shell lay a pearl, large as a hen’s egg, in shape and colour more perfect than any pearl Tzŭ Hsi had ever seen.

“Beautiful! Beautiful!” she cried. “Li, are you a wizard that you cause fish like this to swim in my lake?”

“Will your Majesty angle some more? Perhaps there are other fish enviously waiting to be caught?”

“Let me see if they will bite as well for someone else,” and turning to the court ladies she said, “Come, one of you fish now.” Chou-Chau, always fearful lest she fail promptly to obey a royal command, hastily flung in her line, which was black. She pulled it up with difficulty; everyone crowded near, eager to see what fair fortune such heaviness portended. The next minute a shriek of horror from Chou-Chau and screams of laughter from the others greeted her catch. A dead rat hung limply from her line. Tears of merriment rolled down the Empress Dowager’s cheek. Li grinned wickedly.

"The Lady Chou-Chau is unfortunate in having a black line; fishes do not like black."

"Then," cried the Empress Dowager still laughing, "let us see how they like pink."

A dainty little person stepped forward and, not without trepidation, tried her luck. To her delight she captured a pair of handsome jade ear-rings. And so, one after another, the young women fished and each one caught a jewel of more or less value according as the Chief Eunuch gauged her standing at Court and her favour with the Empress Dowager. His method of managing this fishing bout was sufficiently simple. A young eunuch was posted on the other side of the island raft; at a pre-arranged signal from Li, he dived under the raft, attached the fish to the line, according to instructions already received, and breathlessly returned again to await the next signal.

A-lu-te had contented herself watching the others, but now the Empress Dowager cried, "Come, Wang-ti, fish! fish! Your line is green and I feel sure the fishes will favour a colour which is like their own lake when stirred by the wind."

Privately A-lu-te was of the opinion that they would show the same aversion to green they had already displayed to black. She was resolved, however, not to gratify the Chief Eunuch by any expression of dismay, or horror, even should she too find a dead rat affixed to her line. She exulted when she fished from the depths an exquisite bracelet encrusted with jewels. She did not know

that Li was merely biding his time; that he was not yet ready to strike. The sport continued with great animation for several hours, during which period the Empress Dowager added jewels of great magnificence to a supply which already far surpassed in value and beauty the crown jewels of any European monarch. The eunuch who did the necessary diving and swimming having suddenly died of exhaustion, this part of the entertainment ceased. A sumptuous banquet was now spread, and all regaled themselves with much merriment. All, that is, except poor Chou-Chau, who was looking with timid envy at the handsome fishes caught by her more favoured companions. A-lu-te's gaiety was feverish in its intensity; she was the life of the party. The Empress Dowager was so delighted with her vivacity that in a moment of reckless munificence she offered A-lu-te her choice of jewels from among the precious stones she had come into possession of that day. Everyone gasped with envy and astonishment for no one doubted that the new favourite would select the priceless pearl shaped like a hen's egg which the Empress Dowager had admitted was the most magnificent of all her treasures. Many stole covert glances at the Chief Eunuch, to see how he would take this last caprice of the royal lady, a caprice which gave to one who was not even a princess of the blood a jewel fit only for a sovereign to wear and for which the Chief Eunuch had sent emissaries throughout the Orient to find and had

paid untold millions to buy. But Li knew his mistress too well to feel other than maliciously pleased at the unexpected turn affairs had taken. Tzŭ Hsi was sincere today in offering to give away this wonderful jewel, but tomorrow she would be furious against the recipient of her munificence; he would feed the fuel of her rage by accusing the girl of arrogance and presumption in daring to own a gem suitable alone for the adornment of the great rulers of the world. But his satisfaction was short-lived. A-lu-te without bestowing a second glance upon the wealth so temptingly offered her said gaily:

"Jewels formed for her Majesty would look as out of place upon her handmaiden Wang-ti as dragon robes upon a vendor of pots and pans. Instead of pearls, therefore, she asks the privilege of continuing near her Majesty and being one of those who keep watch over her royal slumbers tonight."

Tzŭ Hsi was enchanted with this speech; the court ladies were dumbfounded, for not only did this girl refuse a gem which meant wealth to her and her entire family, but she asked instead to be permitted to perform a duty which they all hated only a degree less than that of waking her Imperial Majesty. As for the Chief Eunuch his vexation was too great to be concealed. He sneered openly. But the Empress Dowager failed to perceive it; she was engaged in graciously granting A-lu-te's request.

Twilight fell and the Court embarked once more. Over the lake luminous lotus flowers floated like fairy lights guiding the fleet to shore. Here hundreds of eunuchs were kneeling, holding aloft glowing lanterns to form the characters of "Peace," "Prosperity," and "Long Life."

When the Empress Dowager landed the eunuchs rose and, still holding high their lanterns, formed a procession and lighted the way to the theatre, where the Court listened to a cleverly dramatized historical poem written by Tzŭ Hsi. It was late when the Empress Dowager finally sought her bed.

CHAPTER XV

A DESPERATE MIDNIGHT VENTURE

A-LU-TE, watching in the Empress Dowager's bedroom, felt her heart throbbing with anxiety and impatience. Would the Great Old Buddha never go to sleep? Would she be for ever closing her eyes only to open them again to scold the slave-girls who were rubbing her ankles with sweet smelling ointments? Sweet smelling ointments! As if the room were not already filled to suffocation with the cloying scents shed from those silk embroidered sachet bags of jasmine, bergamot, roses, and musk, dangling from the sandalwood frame of the imperial bed.

A-lu-te's head felt dull and heavy in the overburdened atmosphere. The room was not large; eight persons besides the Empress Dowager were in it. Every night two slave-girls were on duty here; their work was superintended by two *amahs*¹, who in turn were under constant observation of two eunuchs, while two court ladies were delegated to watch them all.

Outside the door, on the cool tiled floor, six

¹ Maids.

eunuchs squatted, guardians of the entrance to the imperial bedchamber.

Tonight the Old Buddha was overtired and in spite of the skilful massage of the slave-girls she could not sleep. Even a great Empress is not powerful enough to compel the capricious god of slumber to obey her summons. Tzŭ Hsi tossed to and fro on her bed; she twisted and turned, she stretched out her feet and drew them up again; when the slave-girls ceased rubbing but an instant, to pursue the imperial limbs in their restless journeyings, she commanded the *amahs* to slap their faces, which was done with such vigour, the girls' yellow cheeks glowed with scarlet hue. Nor were they the only ones to suffer the royal displeasure. Chou-Chau's cough, which she managed all evening to suppress by supreme effort, now refused to be longer controlled and broke out in a long shaking paroxysm.

In the dim light of the room the blazing eyes of the Empress Dowager resembled two balls of fire. "Stop that noise!" she shrieked, "stop it! Do you think because you are the daughter of the Viceroy Su you can keep me awake with your noise? Ask Li what happened to the concubine Wah-Ping and be grateful if you escape her punishment!"

Chou-Chau nearly burst a blood-vessel in efforts to stifle the cough. Trembling with fear and pain, she buried her head in a cushion to smother the sound.

A-lu-te stepped in front of her, that the Empress

Dowager might not continue to be irritated with the sight of her cough-racked body.

"You need not try to shield her—she is not worth it. She has been in the Palace two years and in all that time has never done one thing right. Her miscellaneous uselessness is marvellous.—You are hurting my ankle with your clumsy rubbing," she cried angrily to the slave-girl nearest her. "Tomorrow you shall have a taste of the bamboo."

"Great Old Ancestor, may your handmaiden speak?" asked A-lu-te.

The Empress Dowager did not answer, she turned her face to the wall. To be angry is to be miserable and Tzŭ Hsi was very miserable indeed; she was utterly tired out and her inability to sleep had well-nigh driven her, as well as her attendants, distracted.

It was frequently her custom, when sleep was long in coming, or when she woke from restless dreams, to rise and go out into the great, quiet night, where the beauty of the stars and the soft sounds of the night-world soothed her irritated nerves, and the poet and the artist in her triumphed over her unrest. But tonight she was overtired and wanted nothing so much as to sleep, and, because she could not lose herself in slumbers in the scent-laden atmosphere, she was angry as a spoilt and wilful child is angry when she is denied that which she wants.

For a while no sound was heard in the room,

except the low, musical tinkling of small, gaily painted glass pendants touched by a breeze which crept through the windows. Suddenly the Empress Dowager said, "Speak then, and be quick about it."

A-lu-te approached the bed. Her voice was low and with that soothing quality which helps to calm sick persons and querulous children. "This handmaiden thinks she can cause sleep to close the eyelids of the Great Old Ancestor, if she will command the slave-girls to yield their place to her."

"Very well, let them go—they are useless as flies, have less brains and are more horrid!"

The slaves were grateful to A-lu-te for relieving them and quickly left the imperial bedside to lean wearily against the wall in a far corner of the room.

A-lu-te, with firm, but gentle fingers, began to stroke the soles of the Empress Dowager's feet. Not being frightened as the slaves had been, her touch was neither nervously weak nor did it press unduly hard. As her hand passed steadily back and forth over the soles of the slender little feet, the Old Buddha felt soothed, her irritability was replaced by a feeling of pleasant calm. Her eyelids began to droop. "Wang-ti," she said drowsily, "I shall soon sleep; you have soothed my heart as well as my aching limbs!" Then, rousing herself, she added with that melody of voice and gracious tenderness of manner few could resist, "Was I cross with you just now, Hsiao Kuniang? No? I am glad of that; I do not want to be cross

with you; I want you to love me all the time, every little minute of every hour." And she closed her eyes and slept like a tired child.

Something stirred in A-lu-te's breast as she stood there still stroking the slender feet. She felt suddenly that, cruel, passionate, as she knew this autocratic Empress to be, who now lay sleeping peacefully, soothed by her touch, she would not willingly harm a hair of her head, and that, except Fen-Sha, there was no one she loved so much. She felt angry and puzzled. Why, she asked herself, could she not hate this woman who exercised her almost unlimited power over her subjects as caprice and passion dictated?

A slight, almost imperceptible, sound caused A-lu-te to turn quickly, her fingers to her lips, cautioning silence. The sound had come from the slave-girls, who, seeing their royal mistress asleep at last, had sunk to the floor, their heads thrown back against the wall, their heavy-lidded eyes closed.

A-lu-te glanced at the others. It was apparent that the slave-girls had but followed the example of the *amahs* and the eunuchs who were now no longer standing, but reclining on the floor, fast asleep.

Chou-Chau alone was waking.

A-lu-te noiselessly drew close to her and whispered in her ear, "Do you sleep also; you are more tired than they; I will keep watch and will rouse you ere they wake."

With a faint sigh of relief, the half-sick and wholly exhausted girl pressed A-lu-te's hand in silent gratitude and, cushioning her head on the pillow which had helped to smother her cough, she too dropped asleep.

A derisive little smile hovered about A-lu-te's mouth, as her gaze rested on these guardians of the royal bedchamber. Cautiously she crossed the room, raised the heavily embroidered portières, and peered into the outer chamber; the six eunuchs were slumbering peacefully stretched full length upon the floor.

A-lu-te returned softly to her post. Her movements had been catlike in their noiselessness. The Empress Dowager was sleeping on her side; her left arm lay upon the rose-silk sheet, her other arm was hidden. A-lu-te could not see, much less touch the ring, upon the forefinger of that hidden right hand.

The minutes passed. The Empress Dowager did not stir; her sleep was profound. What if the eunuchs wakened before she had accomplished her purpose? Or one of the *amahs* or the slave-girls roused themselves to watch? The mere thought made her heart stop beating. The Old Buddha must be made to turn. Slowly, cautiously, A-lu-te slipped her fingers under the hand resting upon the pink cover, and stroked the palm. The sleeper stirred uneasily and moved her hand. A-lu-te stopped, then repeated the stroking. Again the Empress Dowager stirred. A-lu-te

waited, scarcely daring to draw breath. Then slowly, with a little sigh, the slumberer turned, and lay upon her back with both hands resting limply on the rose-silk sheet. Faintly in the dim light the jade seal ring glistened. A-lu-te stared at it fascinated. This was the ring which would save Fen-Sha. Would it slip off easily, or would she have to coax it, gently, persistently, before it consented to leave that small, tapering finger? Would the Old Buddha awaken, alert to what was passing?

Chou-Chau gave a feeble little hack; even in her sleep she tried to suppress the cough. The sound startled A-lu-te; she determined to hesitate no longer. She dipped her fingers in the ointment the slave-girls had used, and softly smeared the forefinger of the Empress Dowager's right hand. Then, with a touch so delicate it might have been a butterfly poisoning on a flower, her fingers closed upon the ring. Slowly, carefully, she drew it upward. Suddenly she stopped, crouching on the floor. Someone behind her had moved. What if the eunuchs were not asleep, but only feigning? They were cunning like most of their kind; that one of them at least would show himself malevolent toward her, she did not doubt, for he it was who had been so terribly whipped because he had failed to escort her from the Palace the day of her arrival.

Furtively she turned to look at him. His mouth had dropped open; his head hung limply on his

shoulders. He was fast asleep, she could not doubt it.

She rose and again began gently to slide the ring upward; the ointment helped to move it easily. The next minute A-lu-te held the Empress Dowager's private seal in her hand. She drew from the bosom of her dress, where she had kept it hidden, the paper on which she had written in vermilion ink the order for Fen-Sha's immediate release from prison. She trembled so violently, she feared she would drop the ring. Clutching it tightly in her small fist, she crept noiselessly to the sandalwood cabinet where were kept the brushes, ink, writing material, and wax of the Great Old Buddha. Here she affixed the seal to her paper. A thrill of triumph passed over her, only to leave her cold again. The ring must be slipped back to its soft resting-place; the six eunuchs in the outer room must be passed, and swiftly, unseen, unheard, she must make her way to the appointed place—the old green and yellow pagoda, standing beyond the Wilderness Park near the western walls of the Palace inclosure, where the American was waiting for her. Not once did she doubt his answer to her summons. She tucked the paper back into her bosom, then glided with the silent movements of a feline thing to the imperial bed. So intent had she become, not to rouse sovereign or servants, she failed to notice the Empress Dowager had turned again in her sleep and lay with her left hand uppermost. Very carefully, very gently, A-lu-te tried

to slip the ring back upon its finger. The ring seemed suddenly, incomprehensibly, to have grown smaller; half-way on the finger, it refused to descend farther. Full of consternation, A-lu-te removed it and, not knowing what else to do, fearing to linger longer, she placed the ring on the second finger, then stole swiftly to the door. Only a few flying hours remained to her, before the Palace world would be awake. Chou-Chau coughed again. At that moment A-lu-te could have strangled her to prevent another sound escaping from those sick, drawn lips. With one parting glance behind her, A-lu-te raised the silken portières and stepped softly into the outer room where the six eunuchs lay stretched on the marble floor. She passed them boldly. Should they wake and see her, she would whisper that she was seeking a lotion to stop the Lady Chou-Chau's coughing, lest it disturb the Great Old Buddha. But she had no need of explanation, the six stalwart guardians of the imperial bedroom did not see or hear her.

Out in the blue night at last! The darkness engulfed her; she could not see a hand's breadth before her. She stood quite still, accustoming her eyes to this blackness. Then slowly, one by one, she discerned the phantom forms of trees, of shrubbery, looming vaguely forth in the night. She groped her way around the pavilion to the marble balustrade, where the white steps led down to the lake. The tall, slender arch surmounting

the steps and which in the daytime looked gaily picturesque with its brilliant colouring, resembled now a dark and threatening portal leading to some dread abyss.

At the foot of the steps, a small imperial barge lay moored. Groping for the yellow rope, A-lu-te unfastened it, and springing into the barge, seized the long pole and pushed out into the lake.

The friendly stars were shining down on her. The world somehow seemed less dark upon the water. Fen-Sha had often told her that the brilliant little star gleaming so gaily among her dimmer sister stars was Chih Nu (Lyra), the patron of weaving. Chih Nu would guide her safely across the lake, for was not weaving a domestic art and would not its heavenly patron prove kindly to a poor maiden seeking to save her lover? And up there somewhere in the blue mysterious vault dwelt also the God of the foreigner. He had helped her so far, surely he would not desert her now! The gods always seemed nearer at night, more ready to comfort, to protect those who prayed to them.

A-lu-te dipped the long pole in the lake and pushed with all her strength. She had to reach a little wooded island which was connected by a long marble bridge to the mainland on the opposite shore. Once there, the rest was easy. She had but to skirt the Wilderness Park till she came to the green and yellow pagoda at the farther end. S'ang had described the place minutely to her; she could

not fail to find it. No guards were there; they were in groups of four and six by the palace gates and at the entrance of every court. Had the barge not been in its accustomed place, she could not have left the court of the imperial pavilion without a challenge.

Everything had been in her favour tonight. Even the poling was less difficult than she had feared; perhaps Chih Nu was aiding her, or perhaps it was the God of the foreigners. These thoughts lent strength to A-lu-te's arms. She reached the island and leaping ashore attached the yellow rope of the barge firmly to a tree. Then she sped over the bridge to the mainland. She skirted the Wilderness Park, and led by an unerring instinct, ran tirelessly, swiftly on, till she came to the green and yellow pagoda standing close to the great gloomy wall, a colossal black serpent encircling the Summer Palace.

She picked up a tiny stone and, throwing it over the wall, waited with raised hand, breathless, like a statue. No sound reached her from the other side.

Till now she had allowed no doubt to enter her mind that Follingsbee would not be there. But as she listened in vain for an answering pebble, a palsy of fear assailed her. If, after all, this foreigner, this college friend of Fen-Sha, whom she had been told to trust implicitly, had failed her at the crucial moment! She threw a second stone, then a third, without result. In the silence of the

night she suddenly heard a faint scraping sound, then something dangled loosely from the wall above her. It was a rope ladder. The next moment a man was clambering down.

"I have come," he whispered.

A-lu-te caught her breath sharply and peered into his face.

"It is you then?" she asked, and added exultingly. "You have kept your promise to come to me, no matter when or where I sent for you!"

"Yes," said Follingsbee quietly; "how can I help you?"

She took from her gown the paper and handed it to him. "It has the Empress Dowager's private seal affixed to an order to release Fen-Sha without delay," she told him.

"Good," exclaimed Follingsbee. "I have maligned her; she is after all a kinder-hearted, better woman than I took her to be."

"She is all you took her to be and more," returned the girl bitterly, "or would I have to steal out in the night to ask aid of a stranger, of a foreigner?"

Follingsbee let his friendly eyes rest upon her, "A foreigner, yes—a stranger, no—for can the friend of your betrothed be called a stranger?"

"You have spoken true," she answered.

He did not ask her how she had obtained the order for the release of Fen-Sha; that she had it was sufficient for the present. It behooved him now to get her safely back to Peking. "Come,"

he whispered hurriedly, "let us hasten. My horse is hidden in a grove of trees below. I have brought a long cloak and a boy's cap for you; in the dark you will not be recognized as a woman. You will ride; I will lead the horse. I will engage a house-boat outside the city walls at a place I know of. Your old *amah* will be waiting there. You will travel as a sick foreigner in my care—no one shall see you—in two days we will be in Tientsin. The boatmen will be well paid to make them hurry."

A-lu-te did not move. "Come," urged Follingsbee, "we must hasten."

"You have said it," she returned, "we must hasten; you to Tientsin—I to the Palace."

"To the Palace," exclaimed Follingsbee; "surely you do not mean to return to the Palace!"

A-lu-te averted her face lest he see the wild longing which was there to fly with him, straight to the shelter of her lover's arms. If for a moment she faltered, it was for a moment only. She would not hinder by her presence the speed of his journey to Tientsin. An hour, a half-hour, even fifteen minutes delay might mean the difference of life or death to Fen-Sha.

"Listen," she said quickly and with emphasis. "The Senior Secretary of the Hing Pu is even now on his way to Tientsin with the Empress Dowager's decree, commanding Fen-Sha's immediate execution. You must be the first to arrive. Before another night sets in Fen-Sha must be outside the

prison gates, or all hope of saving him is lost." In a few graphic words she told him of the scene in the Audience Hall between the Empress Dowager and the Senior Secretary.

"When did the Senior Secretary leave Peking?" demanded Follingsbee.

"He had audience with her early in the morning; she ordered him to travel to Tientsin immediately."

"How did he go?"

"I do not know, but he is an old man and cannot ride, nor would he travel by mule-litter, for that is slow; he would go by water; you yourself have said the journey can be made in two days and he has more than twelve hours' start of you." Her voice grew sharp with the fearful anxiety of that thought. "A boat will not help us now. You must ride," she warned him. For a long moment Follingsbee made no reply. He was engaged in a calculation of time and distance. A-lu-te mistook his silence. With a gust of passion she seized his arm, forgetting the training which taught her that the mere touching of a man's hand was an act of such immodesty no maiden of good repute would be guilty of it. "Speak!" she cried, shaking him. "Speak, and tell me at once you are afraid to enter this race against the Senior Secretary, afraid to do what I, a helpless woman, will do, if you refuse."

Follingsbee spoke then, but as one continuing a line of thought aloud: "Eighty miles of land road between Peking and Tientsin. The English have

a tradition that once long ago Sir Harry Parkes covered that distance in a single day."

"And what he did, you also can do—you so big, so strong! Is it not so?" She was close to him, looking up in his face with tender glowing eyes; the shrillness gone from her voice, which was as soft, sweet, alluring as that of a lovely child coaxing for what it wants.

Follingsbee started. He suddenly became aware of what heretofore he had been all unconscious, namely, that this slender Manchu young woman was not only beautiful, but seductive, compelling, fascinating. It was as if a strong light suddenly shone down upon her, and he saw for the first time the languorous lids of her dark eyes; the soft red of her lips like a double carnation; the oval of her tender cheeks. She drew closer to him. The faint fragrance of the scent-bags at her waist seemed to become stronger. The stillness around was intense; only now and again the breath of the south wind sighed past them. The little hands which had clutched him in a passion of anger but a moment since now lay lightly on his arms like two white doves at rest. He could feel the soft warmth of them through his sleeve.

"You will help me, will you not?" she whispered. "See, it is such a little thing I ask, only a swift ride, over-long perhaps for some, but not for you who are no weakling, but a man such as woman has ever loved since man and woman first were made; a man to whom she turns when danger

threatens, as naturally as a bird seeks its nest at sundown."

Standing there under the stars alone with her, feeling the throbbing of her heart against his own, Follingsbee could have sworn that there was not another woman in the world comparable to her. He did not know the Empress Dowager, so his fascinated fancy carried him back to seek through long centuries another woman who had dwelt upon the banks of the green Nile, a woman whose name alone possessed the power of invoking love and desire. Betty, with all her sweet young freshness, had never made him feel like this. Indeed to Betty he gave no thought. A musician hearing in the valley an orchestra play superbly, does not stop to listen to the sweet piping of a shepherd's flute upon the hillside.

"You will not refuse?" She lifted her drooping eyelids to his face. He bent his head to hers. Their eyes met; Follingsbee, startled at what he saw, drew back. It was as if the cover of a well had been swiftly raised and he gazed down into the luminous depths, not of her soul, but the soul of all womankind and saw that which lies there like a bird of beautiful plumage, white, iridescent, pure, the bird of unselfish love, which never stirs unless roused by the voice, be it ever so faint, of some special soul calling, the voice it may be of a child, of a parent, brother, sister, husband, or lover; then it starts, flutters its wonderful wings, and flies upward; no obstacle, however great, can bar

the way; it goes forth to live, to die, it matters not which, for the soul who summoned it from its slumbers. Abashed, awestruck, Follingsbee turned away. No words were needed to tell him that this girl, young, beautiful, alluring, whose palpitating heart had been pressed against his own, whose warm lips were whispering to him in the silent night, had not given even a passing thought to the man by her side; she was thinking of one in a Chinese prison, many miles away.

"You will go?" she asked.

"Yes."

He knew his pony to be already utterly fagged with the fourteen miles' hard, swift run that night, and he knew too that good ponies were difficult to procure in Peking even after long and careful searching and impossible to find in the poverty-steeped villages on the plains between the Summer Palace and the capital. Yet, in spite of this knowledge, he promised, and he intended to make good that promise.

"Before the moon ripens, Fen-Sha shall be free," he said.

A-lu-te clasped her hands in an ecstasy of hope, fear, and longing. "Oh, go then, go swiftly, now, this very minute," she urged. The words were scarcely spoken when from the deep shadow of the trees in the Wilderness Park emerged two white-robed figures bearing torches, and after them two more, and again two, and still others, a long procession, silently advancing towards them. Fol-

lingsbee felt a cold chill creep over him, such as he had not experienced in the bitterest winter-weather on the Gobi desert. He heard A-lu-te whisper, "Eunuchs."

The name stands for the most depraved, the most sinister figures of Chinese history.

Follingsbee darted a swift look towards the rope ladder dangling from the wall barely ten feet away. He could reach it easily before the eunuchs, even if they saw him, could stop him. But not so A-lu-te, and to leave her now was not to be considered an instant. When he turned towards the approaching eunuchs again he saw that four among them were carrying a coffin. They had come then, not because they knew of his presence, but to conduct a midnight burial.

A-lu-te plucked his sleeve, and, without speaking, pointed to the pagoda near which they were standing. In large niches in the sides of the building were painted wooden images of Buddha seated cross-legged on lotus leaves. Three of these niches, on the first tier, were empty; their images had been destroyed when the great sack of the Summer Palace occurred many years before and had never been replaced. In an instant Follingsbee understood A-lu-te's meaning. Quick as had been her thought he swung her up to one of the empty niches, then seated himself, cross-legged, in another.

Nearer and nearer came the silent procession. Would it pass the pagoda? Would the light of the

torches fall on the girl and himself, seated stiff, immovable, like graven images in the niches? Would the eunuchs see them? What his fate would be in that event gave him no concern, but he shuddered at the thought of A-lu-te, dragged back to the Palace, and of what would befall her there. In the tea-houses, many were the terrible tales he had listened to concerning the fate of girls who tried to escape from the Imperial Palace, when life had become too dreadful to be borne.

How slowly the white-robed procession moved! He could scarcely endure the tension longer. Nearer and nearer came the ghostly figures, walking with long, soft strides like animals; the torches flickered fitfully; the smell of their smoke filled the air. He controlled an almost irresistible impulse to lean forward to look at A-lu-te, to give her some sign of encouragement; but the torches were very near to them now; the least movement could be seen, did some eunuch chance to raise his eyes to the pagoda. Within a few yards of the pagoda the procession suddenly halted. The torches were stuck in the ground half encircling a deep hole, which Follingsbee now saw was a newly made grave. The eunuchs ranged themselves on each side of the grave.

The flickering light of the torches illumined their faces. For a moment Follingsbee forgot the girl's peril and his own in the study of these strange spectres of men. Many of them were tall, most of them were flabby, whether old or young it was

difficult to determine; the faces of some were withered, yet gave a strange impression of youth, of depraved youth struck by the hand of time into old age, in a single night. Their mouths were loose, their countenances expressionless or terribly weary; here and there among them were those who showed a ferocity in their looks that was unlike anything human, as if they wanted to howl, or bite or spit in the face of mankind.

Suddenly the mournful death chant of the Buddhist priests broke the night-silence. First low, then swelling in volume to louder, clearer, and stronger tones, the chant rose to its highest pitch; then slowly it descended and softly sank to a whispering sigh, only to rise again in crescendo, strong, full-throated, vibrant, and again to descend till it became but a whispering breath before ceasing altogether. Then the white-robed mourners took up the death-chant in a long, low, wailing cry which rising higher and higher culminated in a wild and horrible shriek which slowly died away in a sobbing sigh. The last wail died on the night air. The eunuchs took up their torches and, silently as they had come, disappeared in the Wilderness Park. Follingsbee heaved a sigh of relief. His limbs were cramped; he found difficulty in moving them. When the faint glimmer of the last torch was lost in the darkness, he slipped to the ground. "A-lu-te," he called softly, while his eyes still guardedly watched the park. Receiving no reply he turned quickly and looked

up. The niche into which he had swung A-lu-te was empty and he realized that she had daringly made her escape unobserved while the eunuchs were gathered around the grave intent upon their death wail. It was futile to wait in the vain hope of her return. He had intended reasoning with her on her resolution to remain in the Palace instead of making good her escape when the opportunity offered. He clambered up the rope-ladder and dropped to the other side of the wall. Then he hastened to the clump of trees on the hillside where his horse was tethered. The tired beast was standing with low-hanging head, too exhausted to graze. It was soon apparent to Follingsbee that his horse had not the strength left to even carry him. Half-dragging and leading the animal, he descended into the plain, avoiding the soldiers' village on the right, which he would again have been forced to skirt had he directed his steps Peking-ward. He determined instead to make his way somehow to Tung-chou. Once he was persuaded that in so doing he was wrong, that his best, if not his only chance of reaching Tientsin before the Senior Secretary was to hasten back to Peking, await the opening of the gates, and go directly to the Inspectorate, rouse Sir Robert Hart, who alone could authorize the use of the pony-express which carried the mail overland. That the "I. G." (as the Inspector-General of the Imperial Maritime Customs was commonly called) would not grant this extraordinary favour without

being fully informed of the reasons for such a demand Follingsbee knew, and he had grave doubts whether even then he would not meet with an emphatic refusal. For the affair had a political side impossible to ignore, and the "I. G." was not the man to assist in an enterprise which might imperil the existence of any part of the great institution he had spent the best part of his life in perfecting and controlling.

Follingsbee reflected, as he dragged his weary horse along, that, if he could reach Tung-chou, he might make shift somehow to secure fresh mounts along the much-travelled highroad to Tientsin.

The sky, which had been unclouded and pierced by brilliant stars, became overcast. The wind rose and with it came one of those sudden driving rainstorms prone to occur at this season of the year.

Follingsbee had scarcely time to realize his predicament before he was soaked to the skin. Not far off, a fire leapt suddenly into life. He had come upon a small encampment. Two tents rose before him. He approached the larger one, raised the flap, and boldly entered.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RACE

SMOKE filled the interior of the tent. Follingsbee felt stifled, his eyes blinked vainly in an effort to see. He coughed, choked, and groping hastily for the flap, raised it again. A loud, good-natured laugh issued from the rear of the canvas house and through the smoke Follingsbee saw a man squatting by the fire drying his clothes. His flat face, prominent cheek-bones, and sunken forehead proclaimed him a Mongol.

"Enter, Brother, enter!" he called in a shrill, harsh voice, which yet had a tone of hearty welcome in it. "Cannot your eyes and nose endure a little smoke? See, mine are not so large and so fine to look at as yours, but for all that they serve me better."

Again the rollicking laugh echoed through the tent.

"Your heart is large, Brother, and your wit not small. I will gladly sit with you awhile, but let it be near the door that I may draw breath enough to talk." And suiting the action to the words, Follingsbee seated himself by the tent-flap. The

Mongol nodded. "I heard you coming this long time past. It is slow travelling, dragging a beast that was meant to carry you," he said calmly.

Although Follingsbee knew that Mongols have the sense of sight, hearing, and smell developed to an extraordinary degree, his host's remark left him gaping in amazement.

The Mongol, aware of the hit he had made, opened his wide mouth in a laugh which drowned for the nonce the roar of the storm. His gaiety was spontaneous, therefore contagious. Follingsbee found himself laughing whole-heartedly with him.

"Is my Brother travelling to Peking?" the Mongol asked when his merriment had subsided.

"Not so, to Tung-chou."

"That is my sorrow—we could have kept the road together. I go to Peking when the dawn breaks. Is it your purpose to drag your beast all the way to Tung-chou? The *lis* are many."

"It is true, Brother, the *lis* are many when the beast's strength is gone, but, with a good animal, fleet-footed and strong, such as my Brother will sell me ere we part, the distance is less than nothing."

It was the Mongol who now looked his surprise.

"The beasts I have with me are needed; I have none to spare, none to sell."

"I have heard, and I believe it true, that those who dwell in the Land of Grass "(Mongolia)" are hospitable to strangers and quick to relieve their

distress." Follingsbee left his position by the tent-flap as he spoke and seated himself beside his host.

"What is the nature of your distress, Brother?" asked the little Mongol, with quick interest, for he, like all his people, dearly loved a personal narrative.

Follingsbee, aware of this trait, told a long tale of a sick and dying friend, whose life depended on a medicine he, Follingsbee, had obtained from one who in turn had it from a living Buddha. But the medicine, added Follingsbee, would lose its efficacy if not taken within the next fourteen hours and his friend must die if he did not reach him before the expiration of that time.

"A living Buddha!" exclaimed the Mongol; "where dwells he?"

"Close by—in the Western hills."

"That is but a few short *lis* from here! I will to him myself, such medicine is good to have. Who knows but that some day I too may be stricken with the same sickness of which your friend is dying! Yes, yes, I will put off going to Peking at dawn, though I fear I may thereby be too late to see the Lama Bokte who is to manifest his power at the midday hour. Many pilgrims will be there to witness the great marvel. But the preservation of my life is a more important matter to me." The Mongol's voice had taken on a feeble tone as of one who is about to give up the ghost. The mere thought that he might some day be smitten

with this unknown sickness and die of it unless he had the living Buddha medicine, had suddenly alarmed him. His round, ruddy face and robust appearance were so ill in accord with the feeble pipe of his new voice, that Follingsbee with difficulty restrained his laughter.

"Listen, my Brother," he said. "My friend contracted this sickness while in a foreign country which lies far beyond the seas to the West. Only those who travel to that land become smitten with the disease, therefore have no fear, you are quite safe, for you have never journeyed there."

"Thanks be to Buddha for that!" exclaimed the Mongol fervently.

He pulled a Buddhist rosary from his pocket and began to chant the six-syllable prayer of Tibet and Mongolia, "Om mani padme houn. Om mani padme houn," over and over again, twisting and turning his beads the while.

Follingsbee waited patiently until the Mongol had concluded his oraisons, then he asked mildly:

"And now, Brother, you will sell me your horse, will you not?"

"That I will!" returned the little man cordially, "but first we will feast. When the stomach is full, the journey is short." He rose, stepped to the tent-door, and called lustily. From the adjoining tent a sleepy voice answered; a few minutes later a young boy entered carrying a large pot which he placed over the fire.

"The food is cooked, it will not take long to heat

it," said the Mongol. And so it proved. In a short time the boy plunged his hands in the boiling pot and threw on the board, which served them for a table, a mass of the most disgusting looking victuals Follingsbee had ever seen. It was the intestines of a sheep, the spleen, bowels, liver, heart, and kidneys, stuffed with blood and meal and retaining much of the appearance seen in the live animal.

The Mongol twisted off a piece of the bowels and began eating with unction, inviting Follingsbee at the same time to do likewise. Controlling the nausea which threatened to assail him, Follingsbee helped himself to a portion of the liver. The boy in the meantime pounded salt between two stones and with this adjunct to their meal, Follingsbee found his appetite became less squeamish.

Although unable to keep pace with his host and the latter's boy in the matter of devouring large quantities of the food, he managed to make fair inroads upon his portion. While they ate, the Mongol talked volubly.

"This turning of night into day, my Brother, always pleases my humour, when I take the road to Peking. Ay, ay, that is a city for the gay and young! Famous times I have had there! As to dice and drink and the pleasures of the heart, I think I can boast of having enjoyed as much of them as another."

"Do you take the road to Peking often?" inquired Follingsbee, stolidly struggling with his meat.

“Formerly yes—but seldom now, alas! I could tell you tales of my exploits there! There was one—the Moon-formed she was called—I remember I met her when I journeyed to the capital with the retinue of the Tartar Prince Ta-Pou. We were bringing an immense supply of pomatum made of pheasants’ eggs to the Yellow City. The Western Empress Tzŭ Hsi used it to impart that peculiar and renowned lustre to her hair, formerly so much admired by An Te hai. Little Moon-formed and I were——”

“Who was An Te hai?” asked Follingsbee, interrupting the narrative. He feared the love exploits of the Mongol and his little Moon-formed would be both long and wearisome to listen to.

The Mongol looked at him and laughed. “Nature gave us one tongue and two ears, so that we could hear twice as much as we speak. You are a man grown and yet till now it seems have made small use of your ears, since you do not know about this An Te hai. Well, I will tell you what every frequenter of tea-houses knows. An Te hai was a false eunuch in the Yellow City and beloved by the Empress Tzŭ Hsi. After the Emperor Hsien-Feng ascended the Dragon Throne on high, An Te hai ruled China, because he was supreme in the Palace. He wore the dragon robes sacred to the use of emperors and Tzŭ Hsi gave him the jade *ju-ji* before all the Court. She bore him a child, some say a son, others declare it was a daughter,

but no one knows with certainty, for the scandal became so great the Empress was alarmed, and the infant was smuggled from the Palace one night and the story of its birth vigorously denied. But Prince Kung, the watch-dog of the Throne, knew the danger of such scandals to the power of the Manchu Dynasty. He bided his time and it came ere long. The extravagance of Tzū Hsi and her lover had so diminished her funds, she allowed him to go on a special mission to Shantung to collect tribute in her name, a proceeding without precedence and most illegal. No sooner had this arrogant and presumptuous false eunuch arrived in Shantung, than Prince Kung sought a private audience with the Eastern Empress, a weak and timorous woman. He persuaded her, though with difficulty, to sign a decree commanding the summary decapitation of her powerful colleague's favourite, and it is said she wept bitterly as she appended her signature, declaring she would surely be killed for her temerity. Well, An Te hai lost his head—it was a handsome one—and the Eastern Empress died suddenly a few years later, so were her fears fulfilled. The Western Empress has reigned alone ever since. She is a great woman, is the Old Buddha, a woman of action, of impulse, of sentiment. She has her faults, but which of us have not? Assuredly I, my Brother, am not without them."

The Mongol seemed suddenly to have fallen into a melancholy mood. He sighed frequently

and every now and again murmured his prayer, "Om mani padme houn!"

"You are sad, Brother; what afflicts you?" asked Follingsbee.

The Mongol took a vigorous pinch of snuff.

"The reptile!" he answered, heaving another sigh.

"The reptile!" exclaimed Follingsbee, involuntarily casting his eyes around the tent.

"Yes, even so, for my demerits are indeed great." And again the ruddy little man, near to bursting with the amount of food he had consumed, sighed volcanically.

"Explain yourself, Brother, while we go to look at the horse you will sell me," said Follingsbee rising. He was anxious to be off.

"Seat yourself, seat yourself, my Brother. When Midchou has scraped the pot and boiled the water for tea, he will bring the beast here. Are you a Taoist then? For it seems you are not a Buddhist, or you would know that the reptile I spoke of belongs to the six classes in which all living beings are divided. The first class is angels, then men, demons, quadrupeds, birds, and reptiles. Living beings, by continual transformation, according to their virtues, or their sins, pass about in these six classes until they reach the apex of perfection, when they become absorbed in the immensity of Buddha, whence emanate all souls and wherein all souls are destined after attaining perfection to return. Now, I have been lax in

many things and above all in the matter of saying prayers, for those who repeat the sacred six syllables devoutly and often, escape the baser transformation and are nearer the great Essence of Buddha."

The Mongol drew forth his rosary and began again to chant, "Om mani padme houn!"

Follingsbee rose softly and lifted the tent-flap. The storm had ceased, the first streaks of dawn were creeping rosily up in the horizon. Before this day, just begun, was ended, he must be in Tientsin; two lives depended upon accomplishing a ride of eighty miles over wretched roads between the rising and the setting of the sun, for something told him that A-lu-te, the brave and beautiful Manchu maiden, would refuse to survive her lover. His own horse lay dead a few short paces off. Should the Mongol's horse prove to be fleet, and of that he had no doubts, for the swiftness of Mongolian beasts was common knowledge, he yet had no chance of reaching Tientsin in time without the aid of a relay of fast horses. How to obtain them he did not know.

The boy passed him carrying the big pot. Follingsbee followed him to the tent where the Mongol's animals were sheltered. There were three horses and a great Bactrian camel, its forelegs folded under its body, its long neck stretched out before it on the ground. It looked like a monstrous snail of some prehistoric time.

He approached the horses and examined them

with keen interest. They were not much to look at; one of them, as if divining his thought, bit at him viciously.

"Beware, Brother, that one has the temper of a demon; but he runs well."

Follingsbee turned quickly to find the Mongol behind him.

"What distance can he travel, running all the while?" he asked his host.

The little man stroked his thin beard. "That depends, that depends; I have known the beast to keep neck and shoulder with my Lla for thirty *lis* before he began to lag. No other beast has done it."

"Where and what is Lla?" inquired Follingsbee curiously.

"My camel yonder. She is of the racing breed; she goes like the wind and never tires."

Follingsbee started violently. He had heard of these racing camels; they could outrun the swiftest horse and were known to have covered two hundred and forty *lis* in a day. Now two hundred and forty *lis* was eighty miles and Tientsin was eighty miles away! Here was the solution to his problem. Surely Providence had guided him to the Mongol's tent that night. "Brother," he said endeavouring to speak quietly, "I will buy the camel."

"Buy Lla! Not the Old Buddha herself, before whom all men prostrate themselves and say, when she so commands, water is dry land

and dry land is water, not even she can buy my Lla!"

"But my sick friend, Brother! Think of my friend who will die if I give him not the medicine before the night comes round again!" pleaded Follingsbee.

"Take the two horses—they are yours for a little money. But Lla is the darling of my heart, I will not sell her," replied the Mongol firmly.

Follingsbee was however determined to obtain the camel. He tried every argument, every persuasion to induce the Mongol to part with his cherished beast. He even promised to pay full value for the camel and return her in four days, but Lla's owner remained obdurate.

Finally, Follingsbee hit upon an expedient which promised success; he remembered that Mongols, like Chinese, are all fond of games of chance and of betting. Follingsbee broke into a loud laugh. "I see how it is with you, Brother; I will buy the horses, for it is quite plain to me that your precious Lla is no good; she cannot run fifty *lis* a day."

"Not run fifty *lis*!" shouted the Mongol. "I tell you Lla has run two hundred *lis* a day, nay, more, she has run three hundred *lis*. Your talk is contrary to good sense and truly ridiculous."

"Nevertheless that is my conviction, for why did you decline so reasonable a chance to show her speed? I offer you the purchase money besides agreeing to return her within the week. You have boasted overmuch and now are ashamed because

your little Brother has found you out!" And Follingsbee let his laughter ring loud and long through the tent. The Mongol was beside himself with annoyance at the incredulity of his guest.

"You know nothing about it. Your ignorance of camels is that of a child, a girl-child! I tell you Lla can run three hundred *lis* in one day!" he roared.

"And I tell you she cannot run thirty!" Follingsbee came back at him, pretending to hold his sides with laughter. "Look at her! Look at her! Now that my eyes are open to your jest, I can see that if my horse out there were not already dead, he could in dying have outpaced her. Why, I would have wagered you the sum I first offered on his doing it!"

This was too much for the Mongol.

"It is true your beast is dead, but let the wager stand, or rather make a new one. Ride Lla—if she runs not with you three hundred *lis*¹ this day, I will give her to you and the horses with her," he roared again. "Come, put up your money—if you lose, you pay me twice over."

"Agreed," said Follingsbee quickly. He had provided himself with a large sum of money before riding to the Summer Palace in the event of needing it for bribing purposes or other emergencies. He now handed his host the required amount, shaking his head the while in pretended regret at the other's reckless daring in betting on such a

¹ A *li* is about $\frac{1}{3}$ of a mile.

wretched beast. The Mongol laughed heartily in his turn. "It is you, my Brother, who foolishly throws away good money." He became suddenly serious. "My conduct towards you has been irreproachable. Do I speak truth?"

"You did indeed speak truth, my Brother," replied Follingsbee earnestly, "and if I act not honestly in this matter may the curse of Heaven destroy me." He drew from his vest pocket a gold repeating watch and presented it to the Mongol. "Take it, Brother, in token of my friendship; it is a good watch and even in the dead of night, without a light, it will make known the hour to you if you so command."

He answered the look of amazement and incredulity on the little man's face by explaining the mechanism of the watch which sounded the repeater.

The Mongol was delighted; watches he had often seen, but never one like this. "May the star of happiness guide you all your days," he cried; "I leave you in confidence and with a joyful heart. When you return with Lla having lost your wager"—here his small eyes twinkled merrily, "you will find me at the inn of the Five Felicities, close to the Mongol market in Peking."

"Before the week is passed, Brother, Lla and I will be there. And now have the camel brought out that I may mount and be off."

"Midchou!" cried the Mongol, "bring tea!"

The boy appeared with a bumper of tea in which

floated a thick layer of butter, for the little Mongol had acquired in his travels a taste for Tibetan tea.

Follingsbee had drunk of this concoction before; he gulped it down with a show of relish highly gratifying to his host. The camel was now led from the tent, made to kneel, and the clumsy saddle adjusted.

"Avoid wet and marshy ground," warned the Mongol; "stones, thorns, and roughness of whatever nature are nothing to Lla's feet, but in mud she staggers like a man who has drunk too deeply."

Follingsbee seated himself in the saddle and having repeated the word of command which the Mongol had taught him to make the camel rise, he turned her nose south-eastward. Lla stretched her long neck, lifted her cushioned feet, and silently let loose her speed.

The race had begun.

Follingsbee heard the loud, triumphant laugh of the Mongol, then nothing more. He had the sensation of being on a ship caught in a fierce and sudden tempest; he clung to the saddle as he might have clung to the mast to save himself from being cast overboard. Bruised, shaken, with a hideous feeling of having lost his breath, as if in truth he had been inundated by some great wave, he clung desperately to Lla's heaving back. He had a confused consciousness of passing fields of kaoliang, mud villages where dogs ran out and barked furiously, and cemeteries hidden in tall groves of trees. The sun rose with glory in the eastern sky.

The hills, plains, groves, and mud villages which shone pallidly became of a sudden illumined by a golden light glittering beneath the azure of the sky. It was as if the young day had suddenly thrown off the dark covering which had enveloped her and sprang, fresh, rosy, and smiling, from her couch.

On and on flew Lla, her long strides making a speed no animal Follingsbee had known or ridden ever attained before.

Gradually he became aware that the rocking, heaving motion beneath him did not vary; he began to accustom himself to the even tumultuousness of the animal's gait, and was not forced to steady himself with frantic clinging to the saddle. He sat erect and noted with something akin to his usual intelligence the road Lla was taking. She had started south-eastward and had with the docility—some call it stupidity—of her race maintained the same direction. In the distance, he saw a shining, twisting, threadlike thing lying across the landscape, like an elongated numeral eight. Was he nearing the banks of the great canal? Impossible! No canal ever curved back upon itself like that and no river either, except one—the Pei-ho! Follingsbee rose in his stirrups and shouted aloud. The Pei-ho!—the canal then lay behind him and Tung-chou too, for there was no sign of another waterway on the horizon where Tung-chou, the great pneumatic pump of Peking, would be. In his joy he leaned over and patted the camel's neck. "Good girl! good girl!" he called.

The "good girl" turned her head sideways without lessening her speed, curled back her hare-lip, and showed two rows of vicious-looking teeth. The sight caused Follingsbee quickly to relapse into his saddle.

On and on went Lla, mile after mile, her gait unvaried, her speed undiminished. The wonder of it left her rider astounded; now they were on the banks of the Pei-ho, now traversing the great high-road frightening donkeys, mules, and horses. Follingsbee heard loud shouting, saw women in wheelbarrows jump from their humble conveyance and scurry out of his way and drivers of carts leave their charges to leap nimbly to one side. Every living creature, even the dogs who barked at him from the safe shelter of adjoining fields where they had taken refuge, fled before his approach.

Only the Emperor's advance guard could have cleared the great Peking and Tientsin highway more effectually than did Lla, the racing camel. On and on she went through crowded mud villages, small agglomerations of hideous hovels which looked as if thrown together by the giant hands of some Brobdingnagian infant. The frightened inhabitants fell pellmell over one another, or rushed to their doors to see the strange sight. By the height of the sun in the heavens, Follingsbee knew it was noon. He was aching in every bone in his body and consumed with a terrible thirst. Perspiration fell from him in hot muddy streamlets, for he was covered with the dust and dirt of the

country. His face was unrecognizable; he might have been a Mongol, a Chinese, or, except for his clothes, a native of distant India. A white man he certainly did not appear, and perhaps this fact saved him from assault on more than one occasion when the quagmire street of some exceptionally filthy village caused Lla to slip and slide, or to stop and convulsively gather her legs together and jump where the mud was deeper than she liked. In these nasty places, the stench was intolerable. Follingsbee shuddered at the thought of finding himself prostrate in the midst of the filth. The effort to retain his seat when Lla leaped required all his strength and, as he clasped the camel's hump with both arms and glued his feet to her sides, the village people shrieked with delight at the spectacle he offered them. Out on the firm road again, his increased fatigue from these efforts made it seem well-nigh impossible to continue riding the living, heaving mountain beneath him. He retained his seat only by an exertion which had become wholly mechanical. His eyes were blood-shot; his nostrils, caked with dirt, quivered incessantly; his mouth gaped wide for breath. He no longer took note of time or space; his entire mind was absorbed in one thought, that of keeping on Lla's back. Once he heard someone saying, "Why am I here? Where am I going?" The spoken words had the effect of rousing him from the semi-stupor into which he had fallen. The highroad was again skirting the sinuous Pei-ho;

junks of every shape and size were on the river. Here and there a house-boat glided by. Follingsbee suddenly remembered the Senior Secretary. Was his boat there too? One of them was of special size and beauty; Follingsbee looked anxiously for the yellow flag which would be floating from the prow, denoting that the traveller was "upon the business of the Emperor." But the pennant was red and white, and the boat was going Peking-ward. On the narrow little tow-path, slow-moving coolies bent double over the rope harnessed about their half-naked bodies were towing the heavy craft. By and by a brilliant red glow coloured land and river. Follingsbee's bloodshot eyes roamed wearily over the landscape to discover the conflagration. It was several minutes before his dazed brain understood that the glow had its origin not in a fire, but in the setting of the sun. God! how late it was! Was he near Tientsin? Had he still far to go? Would he arrive on time or was the Senior Secretary even now witnessing Fen-Sha's execution?

Lla's long strides never changed, on and on she bounded, no signs of weariness apparent in her leaping gait.

The red glow faded from land and sky. Twilight fell and still Lla's gallop never faltered and still Tientsin was not in sight. The darkness gathered about them. Follingsbee's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, his head sank lower and lower on his breast; his hands relaxed their hold upon the

bridle; they no longer guided the camel. He seemed riding through chaos and abysses; he knew nothing, saw nothing. Suddenly she stopped, her nose against a mud wall. With a supreme effort Follingsbee roused himself. He saw lights, men's voices sounded near. He heard someone say, "Does your beneficent shadow desire to descend at my humble inn tonight?"

"What place is this?" he managed to articulate.

"The inn of the 'Blue Sea,'" came the answer.

"I-go-on-to-Tientsin," muttered Follingsbee thickly.

"To Tientsin! Then you have not far to go, noble personage," laughed the innkeeper, "for Tientsin is here and mine is the first house of repose, humble though it is, at this end of the town. Descend! descend! you may seek farther and fare worse; many innkeepers refuse shelter to such beasts as yours. Travellers with large retinues will not lodge where camels are; they have a stinking breath and their cry is raucous and mules and horses fear them."

Follingsbee heard only the first part of this speech and that acted like a stimulant to his exhausted body. He had reached Tientsin at last!

"Sok! Sok!" he said to the camel.

The animal folded her legs under her huge body and slowly sank to the ground. Follingsbee slipped from her back, staggered, and fell forward on his face.

Almost at the same moment, a chair passed,

preceded by *mafoos*, shouting, "Lend me your eyes! Lend me your eyes!"

In the chair sat an old man. He was very tired and the rheumatism in his legs, he told himself with a wry face, had not been benefited by the two days' river journey he had just completed.

He was the Senior Secretary of the Hing Pu.

CHAPTER XVII

OUTWITTED

THE innkeeper of the "Blue Sea" was a good-natured man. He was also a quick appraiser of each guest's ability to pay. His trained eye saw that Lla was a camel of greater value than the best of the breed he had seen; nor did he fail to note that the saddle was a handsome one. He entertained no doubt therefore that this man who lay like a log at his feet, who had arrived with no one in attendance upon him, would be able to pay whatever he chose to demand for the care and attention he was about to bestow on him. He summoned a servant. Together they helped Follingsbee to his feet and half carried, half dragged him into the large room of the inn and laid him on the brick K'ang, where four or five Chinese were already reclining. The room was dimly lighted by wicks floating in dirty oil in some half-dozen saucers. The innkeeper ordered his servant to fasten the camel to a stake in a corner of the court.

"Lord of the soup kettle," cried one of the men on the K'ang, leaning over to inspect Follingsbee's

face curiously, "Under what quarter of the heavens was this man born whom you have deposited here like a sack of charcoal? His dress is Chinese, the dirt on his person is the dirt of a Tartar, and he reeks like a driver of camels."

"Not a driver, but a rider of camels," retorted the innkeeper, "and it matters little whence he came or what quarter of the heavens he was born in, since he is here and has a churl like you for a bed-fellow."

"Governor of the meat pot, you lie, he is no bed-fellow of mine." With which remark the man doubled himself up like a jack-knife and shot his legs out again with astonishing force and vigour, thereby kicking Follingsbee from the K'ang into the middle of the room. At this nimble feat, the other guests set up a loud laugh, in which the landlord and his servants joined heartily.

It is seldom a man has reason to be grateful for the administration of a kick to the centre of his back, or indeed to any portion of his anatomy. Had Follingsbee known the cause of his sudden return to consciousness he would probably have given expression to his sense of gratitude by a blow on the kicker's head. As it was he only rolled over on the hard floor and sat up to stare about him in dazed bewilderment at his surroundings. Then his eyes lighted on the innkeeper. "Drink," he tried to articulate, but his voice uttered no sound. In a corner of the apartment a guest was squatting before a small glazed earth oven on which rested a

kettle. He was absorbed in the preparation of his tea. Follingsbee rose, staggered towards him, and throwing a Mexican dollar in his lap, snatched from him the bowl he was about to raise to his lips. The tea was still boiling hot, but Follingsbee drank it down in one quick gulp. Everyone was surprised with the munificence of this man who could fling away silver coin for a dish of tea. The innkeeper hastened to his side, bowing and rubbing his hands. His manner was obsequious, his tones unctuous, "Super-excellent gentleman, your servants have not yet appeared to prepare your meal and your noble stomach is no doubt demanding more substantial alimentation than tea. My humble larder is full; pray accept my trifling services as cook. Will you partake of sheep's tail, chicken, or succulent pork?"

Just then the piercing horrible screams of Lla were heard outside in the court.

"Give my camel water and food and keep her until my return. Send a servant to fetch me a cart," commanded Follingsbee huskily. He flung mine host of the Blue Sea some money and staggered into the court. While he waited for the cart, he watched Lla suck up long draughts of water from wooden buckets placed before her, and he envied the beast her length of throat which was so pleasantly getting moist and having its great thirst slaked.

His own throat was still painfully parched, making his speech, when he essayed to talk, so thick

and guttural, it was unlike the speech of foreigner or Chinese.

A cart having finally been procured, the inn-keeper assisted Follingsbee to crawl into it, keeping up the while a steady stream of talk. "Distinguished eminence, it is a weight upon my heart that you go from my miserable establishment" (and miserable it surely was!) "without regaling your noble stomach with nourishment. Doubtless when you return to claim your magnificent camel, you will not disdain the humble repast of chicken, pork, and cakes I shall have prepared for you. Where shall I direct the cartman to drive you, most noble, transitory guest?"

The men in the inn had by this time gathered around the cart, idly curious to learn upon what pressing business this stranger, exhausted as he was, must needs repair without first taking reasonable rest.

"The Yamen—let the mule gallop," commanded Follingsbee.

"The Yamen!" they exclaimed in chorus, "he rides to the Yamen!"

No man ever went to the Yamen at this hour, unless he were dragged there by lictors, or was one in authority.

The curiosity of the men was more than satisfied; they drew back in a half frightened, half deferential manner. But the young fellow who had assisted Follingsbee from the K'ang by the dexterous manipulation of legs and boots now ran

swiftly back into the public room, gathered up his roll of bedding lying on the K'ang, and made off. He had no mind to take chances on being summoned before the magistrate for having kicked an official, even if that official had pretended to ignore the act.

The cart rattled out of the court of the inn of the "Blue Sea" and followed a series of tortuous, malodorous, narrow streets till it drew up with a jerk before a high, brick wall. A lantern swung from the gate, shedding its dim light upon a miserable wretch seated near the entrance. A four-cornered heavy wooden collar was suspended around his neck in a manner to effectually prevent him from lying down, nor could his hands reach his mouth even for the purpose of putting food into it. A long red strip of paper with the magistrate's seal affixed was pasted on the board and read, "This man is a thief; he will wear the cangue three weeks."

Follingsbee dismissed the cart, and knocked vigorously upon the gates. They were opened and he entered the outer court of the Yamen, or, as the bulk of the people frequently dubbed it, "Terrestrial hell," for the Yamen, in their minds, is synonymous with torture and death.

Most of the Yamens are built on the same general plan, namely four divisions consisting of courts and buildings. The first division contains the prison, also the quarters for the lictors, the wardens, porters, etc., the second is given up to the

various offices connected with the administration of justice; here, also, is the room where the accused is tortured to elicit from him a confession of guilt. The third division is the private office of the mandarin, together with the rooms for the reception of guests and the dwellings of the secretaries. The last division is wholly given over to the mandarin and his family.

The porter closed and locked the gates; he moved leisurely and indifferently. Follingsbee called to him in an angry, raucous voice, "Dog! make haste, announce to the Magistrate that a message awaits him from her Sacred Majesty, the Empress Dowager, that her courier has ridden without intermission for many hours, killing six horses on the road, to deliver her august commands into his unworthy hands."

Astounded, the porter stared at the imperial messenger and noted that the bloodshot eyes, the dirt-coated face, the stained garments, did in truth bespeak one who had just completed a long toilsome journey. But not till Follingsbee flourished before his eyes the paper bearing the imperial seal did he cast aside all doubt and throw himself on his knees.

"Do you hear?" demanded Follingsbee.

"Yes," he replied humbly.

"Hasten and obey."

The man rose and shouted lustily. From a building on the right of the court some half dozen

lictors rushed out, adjusting their official hats as they ran.

"On your knees! On your knees!" cried the porter. "A messenger from the Lord of Ten Thousand Years has arrived!" Every man prostrated himself.

Follingsbee was in no mood for ceremonies. "Make haste!" he roared with all the strength of his husky voice; "summon the Magistrate!"

"Follow us, follow us, my Lord, we lead you to him," cried two of the lictors.

"Lead me to him, dogs! What language is this? Does the petty Magistrate of this Yamen receive thus the commands of the glorious, the great Tzŭ Hsi-Kuan yu-K'ang-i-chao-yu-chuang-ch'eng-shou-Kung-chi'in-hsien-chung-hsi? Let the Magistrate appear!"

"We obey! We obey!" cried the lictors. "The Magistrate is with the Senior Secretary of the Hing-Pu, who arrived a half hour since; but we will summon him to my Lord forthwith."

They started to run. Follingsbee seemed to feel the blood stagnate in his veins. He had arrived too late! The race was lost; the Senior Secretary had won by half an hour. Everything was finished; Fen-Sha was already hacked into mince-meat; and he was caught like a rat in a trap from which it was vain now to try and escape.

Something, he knew not what, within him groaned. It sounded hideously loud. Had the men heard him? Those near him were regarding

him curiously. He straightened himself suddenly. The action seemed to stimulate his power of thought.

"Halt!" he called to the two lictors. They were opening the gate of the second enclosure. Obediently they waited.

"What execution has taken place within the hour?" he asked.

"No execution has taken place within the hour," they answered.

"When did the last execution take place?"

"At the hour of the Sheep."

"The criminal's name?"

"Ly-Ko-Nan, the river robber."

"It is well. Summon the Magistrate. Let it be done quickly, but quietly. The Senior Secretary of the Hing-Pu must not hear of the arrival of the imperial courier, lest he take alarm and attempt to withdraw. This is important. Go!"

The two lictors ran; the others whispered together; the Senior Secretary was in disgrace then! What had he done? And who was great enough to escape the Old Buddha's wrath?

Follingsbee waited. The danger of the game for him had increased tenfold but Fen-Sha still lived. The next few minutes would decide whether he could rescue the young Chinese reformer, or whether he had imperilled his own life futilely.

If the Magistrate appeared alone, all might yet work out well; if he came accompanied by the

Senior Secretary, the game was up. Follingsbee felt himself growing weaker and weaker. In the bottom of his soul a sickening fear assailed him. Had the porter or one of the lictors looked at him then, they would have seen a shudder pass over him and his eyes roam over the court like a man who is in dread of death. Suspicious and cunning as those in Yamens are prone to be, their confidence in his integrity would have been shaken and detection would have quickly followed, for at that moment Follingsbee had neither wit nor strength left with which to defend himself. Soon he fell in a kind of mental distraction. His thoughts flew, not to the condemned man he had come to rescue; not to A-lu-te, risking her life for her lover behind the imprisoning walls of the Summer Palace; not to Betty, the girl he loved; but to the fat little Mongol waiting at the inn of the Five Felicities near the Mongol market for the return of Lla, the racing camel. Somehow it seemed to Follingsbee that the necessity of communicating with the Mongol was paramount to every other necessity. "Yes, yes," he said to himself, "I must take back Lla to him; it is impossible that I should die before I have done that." And he spread out his legs to steady himself. "A great runner is Lla; the Mongol is right, she is incomparable. I must return to tell him the wager is his. Why am I kept waiting here?"

Rage possessed him at the thought that any man dare attempt to delay his return, and, with rage,

came strength. He stamped his feet and shouted hoarsely. The lictors ran to him; they could not understand his muttered words. Voices were heard in the second court; the next moment the gates were opened and the Magistrate appeared. He was alone. He came forward slowly, then halted, hesitating whether to advance or summon this imperious messenger to approach him. His face expressed a curious blending of deference and suspicion. Follingsbee did not move, instead he frowned, and his bloodshot eyes glared at the Magistrate, while he held in his hands the yellow paper A-lu-te had given him. The Magistrate was alarmed, but still inclined to incredulity. It was strange, he thought, that the great Old Buddha should send a courier to him right on the heels as it were of the Senior Secretary, who came directly from the "Sacred Mother" herself, bearing an important command.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

Follingsbee, still frowning, thrust the paper before the Magistrate, displaying the Empress Dowager's private seal. The Magistrate gave one glance at the seal and dropped on his knees, while he uttered the ceremonial greeting of the distant official to his sovereign, "Ah ha, Ching Sheng An" (Your servant gives you greeting).

Still kneeling he read the paper by the light of the lanterns his servants held on either side of him.

"A Vermilion Rescript. Information has reached us in the seclusion of our Palace, that our Chinese

subject, Fen-Sha, has been wrongfully accused of heinous offences against the Throne and that the courts deliberately obstructed the proper hearing of his case, instigated thereto by certain guilty parties in high places who desired to shield themselves and whose names are now known to us. Our soul is vexed with such abominable treachery which we shall know how to deal with in due season. Let Fen-Sha be liberated without the fraction of a moment's loss of time. Any delay in this matter will involve heavy penalties. This decree to be conveyed by special courier. Let everyone obey."

The Magistrate was now thoroughly frightened. Fen-Sha had been tried in his court in accordance with Chinese law. He had been convicted and sentenced to the lingering death and the Senior Secretary had arrived less than an hour ago to hasten the execution of the sentence.

The Senior Secretary, said the Magistrate to himself, was evidently one of those in "high places" the Old Buddha meant, and already he was a fish in the jar. But he, the Magistrate, would hasten to comply with the Vermilion Decree, and so save himself from imprisonment in that same jar.

"The keys!" he commanded, and strode towards the prison. Follingsbee followed like one who is sleep walking. The heavy door was unlocked and it swung open with a grating sound. A horrible stench assailed the nostrils, shrill cries

issued from the dark interior and mingled with the clanking of chains. The Magistrate and Follingsbee entered, preceded by the lictors holding lanterns.

The enclosure was small; on three sides were ranged the cells of the prisoners. Death and terror hovered in the air. Around the ankle of every prisoner, iron rings were attached, connected by a foot length of chain, to which was fastened a five foot long block of wood. Some of the prisoners had their hands free, more were handcuffed; the shackles fastened by chains to the iron rings on their ankles. Here and there a malefactor had a chain around his waist and another around his neck, both being attached to iron rings on his ankles and iron bracelets on his wrists. The weight of all this metal made movement almost impossible, or so painful the prisoners preferred to remain for hours, days, even weeks, without changing their position. Their clothes hung from them in shreds, or had dropped entirely off, disclosing deep welts on legs and shoulders, made by the whippings they had received.

Follingsbee stared with glassy eyes, which only half saw, at a man whose swollen lips were cut to ribbons, whose teeth wobbled loosely in their sockets from the blows administered upon his mouth with a heavy strip of leather. He could not speak and had been unable to eat for many days. The whites of his eyes shone ghastly. He was slowly dying from pain and hunger. Next to

him lay a young man who, though more heavily weighted with irons than many of the others, was neither as feeble or emaciated as his fellow-prisoners. This was due to the large bribes the guards had received to keep him well furnished with food and drink, and also because the death sentence had been pronounced upon him. The authorities permitted such indulgences (when richly paid for) that the prisoner might not enter the spirit world a half-starved shadow and be tempted to return and haunt those who had condemned him. It was before this man the Magistrate halted. "The Sacred Mother in her great beneficence has pardoned you and commanded your release. You are free to go hence." Astonishment seized the man, he looked from the Magistrate to Follingsbee and back again to the Magistrate, without uttering a syllable. The chains were unlocked from his body; they fell from him with a loud clanking noise. Cries and groans now came from the prisoners near him, "Pardon, pardon, for us, too, O, Lord!" The cry was taken up by other poor wretches in more distant cells, till the stinking air teemed with sobs, supplications, and groans. The Magistrate gave command to beat them into silence.

The young man who found himself so unexpectedly free of his chains, fell on his knees and begged the Magistrate to thank the "Beneficent Mother"; then he rose stiffly, stood a moment accustoming himself to his unfettered condition, and slowly

followed the Magistrate and Follingsbee from that hellish place.

In the outer court the Magistrate invited the imperial courier to take refreshment in the guest house. Much there was he wished to learn and here in the court, in the presence of the warden, the lictors, he would not speak openly. In a strange tongue and in a broken, indistinct, halting voice Follingsbee answered. The Magistrate looked blank. "What do you say?" he asked.

Again Follingsbee answered and again in English: "The-Mongol-was-right. Lla-is-a-great-runner. I-must-to-Peking-and-tell-him."

It was then that the released prisoner began to tremble violently. He looked toward the great gates already unlocked and opened by the porter. No one would prevent him if he dashed out, such haste would be natural to a man who had just received his pardon and been liberated from prison. It seemed for a moment as if he would run. Then he deliberately turned, flung himself on the ground before Follingsbee, and in a loud voice said, "I hear, Imperial Edict shall be obeyed. I am ready to accompany you back to Peking."

On hearing this, the Magistrate addressed his erstwhile prisoner in wheedling tones. "Fen-Sha, you are going to Peking. I do not think you have any complaint to make of me. I have not eaten your money and, if you have been a prisoner in my Yamen, it was because those higher in authority than I convicted you. You see I do

not conceal the truth from you. Imperial Edict now summons you to Peking. May your report of my conduct be a good one. I offer up wishes for your prosperity. When you return my services are yours."

"Your conduct towards me has been irreproachable," lied Fen-Sha, "my report will be an honest one."

He touched Follingsbee's sleeve. "It is time. Come," he said, and added firmly, distinctly, "To Peking."

Follingsbee nodded, he understood that he was to return to Peking. The great gates closed behind them. They were alone on the street except for the wretch with the cangue on his neck, who still sat by the Yamen entrance. He had dropped asleep exhausted, but woke to whine for help as the two young men came out. Fen-Sha had seized his rescuer's arm. "Hurry!" he whispered in English. Follingsbee jerked himself free. "Yes, yes," he said, "but where is Lla? I cannot go without Lla!"

In vain Fen-Sha urged him in a low voice, vibrant with fear, not to linger, but to hasten with all speed from the place. Follingsbee planted his feet firmly and wagged his head to and fro. "Undoubtedly you do not know Lla; she can run like the wind, no animal can compare to her. I will not go without her." From behind the Yamen walls came the sound of loud and confused voices. Fen-Sha seized Follingsbee's arm again and at-

tempted to drag him off. His efforts were futile. The wretch in the cangue whined louder, showing his long yellow teeth; he stretched out a naked arm in supplication. Follingsbee stared at him stupidly, then gravely inquired, "Have you seen Lla?" A cunning look came into the man's drawn face. "My Lord," he said, "how should I know? Perhaps I have. Ease me but a few small seconds of this awful weight by holding it up that I may think clearly."

He had scarcely finished speaking before Follingsbee was tugging at the wooden collar and, with all his strength, was endeavouring to wrench open the lock.

"Stop! Stop!" cried Fen-Sha, in his ear. "We are lost if you do that, and we are lost if you do not leave this place immediately. Hark! What are they howling about in there?" He stood an instant intently listening to the voices, stridently loud now, on the other side of the wall.

"Hell!" he muttered, "the Senior Secretary is there haranguing them! We are lost without doubt now if I cannot induce this madman to run."

He turned again to Follingsbee and saw, to his amazement, that, with the superhuman strength of the delirious, he actually had wrenched apart the locked cangue. The huge wooden collar fell with a dull thud to the ground. The thief, without stopping to utter a word of gratitude, ran off on all fours like an escaped wild beast. This enraged Follingsbee; he tore after him, shouting

angrily, "You devil's imp, you black rogue, stop! I tell you stop! You said you knew where Lla was!"

Fen-Sha rushed after Follingsbee, glad that at last he was running from the dangerous vicinity of the Yamen, it mattered not on what absurd errand. Of a sudden Follingsbee stopped, put his hand to his forehead, his feet slipped from under him, and he sank to the ground, a loose-jointed, inert mass.

Fen-Sha was a small man, as the Chinese from the South are apt to be, but his muscles were brawny. He stooped and picking up Follingsbee flung him over his shoulder. Bent double under his burden he ran on. The American's legs were long, they scraped the ground, impeding the flight. Fen-Sha turned into a side street, narrow, twisting like a corkscrew. He ran till his lungs were ready to burst, then he slowed to a snail's pace. He could go no farther with his burden. In the distance he heard shouting; it grew louder, nearer, momentarily. "The entire Yamen has turned out to get us," he panted. A cart rattled around the corner of an adjoining street. A lantern swung from the shafts. Fen-Sha hailed the driver; the man gave no heed, unless it was to urge his mule to a faster trot. Fen-Sha made shift to follow, still calling. "Idiot!" yelled the driver back at him, "the foreign Excellency I am driving doesn't want such scum as you for company."

Fen-Sha dropped Follingsbee from his back as

he would have dropped a bag of coal or any kind of commodity and bounded after the cart, calling in English, "Help! help! an American is dying!"

A sharp, imperative voice from the interior of the clumsy vehicle ordered the driver to halt and a foreigner sprang from the cart. The cries of the pursuers drew nearer and nearer. "Quick!" gasped Fen-Sha. "An American, Mr. Follingsbee, has dropped from exhaustion back here. Will you take him to the American Consulate?"

"Not by a long shot!" answered the foreigner, who was known all over the foreign concession of Tientsin as Billy Lade of the Hanky Spanky, as the Hong-Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation was called. "If the chap is Follingsbee he's a friend of mine and goes to my house. Where is he?" "I will bring him," replied Fen-Sha, and ran back a short distance. Billy Lade ran, too. He did not hesitate when he saw a man in Chinese dress lying in the dirt of the street. He had acquaintance with the incomprehensible fondness of his friend for masquerading in native garb. He assisted Fen-Sha in carrying him to the cart. The sound of many men running mingled plainly now with the shouting.

"The Yamen officers!" whispered Fen-Sha. "They are after me. Follingsbee got me out of prison at the risk of his life; hide him under the seat; tell the men when they stop you, you saw me running in that direction," pointing to an alley on the left.

"Got a name?" asked Billy Lade, peering into the round boyish face. The other nodded. "Well, what in hell is it?" "Fen-Sha," he answered and vanished in the darkness of the street.

Even Billy Lade had heard of Fen-Sha, the indefatigable organizer of reform clubs in the North and South of China; a man of sincerity and high purpose and loved by the people.

Billy Lade climbed into his cart and ordered the driver to proceed without undue haste and instructed him what to say should anyone stop to question them.

"And," he continued menacingly in his execrable Chinese, "if you speak a word other than I have told you, I will deliver to the Yamen officials your brother for complicity in that Nin-Yeng affair."

The driver required no other inducement to obey Billy Lade's instruction.

The shouts behind them now resolved themselves in loud commands to halt. The cart came to a standstill; it was surrounded by a rush of men waving lanterns in their left hands and short swords in their right.

"Who rides here?" rasped an authoritative voice. A lantern was thrust into the cart, followed by the yellow countenance of a lictor with fantastic headgear.

"Neither devil nor ghost, but may both haunt your steps till you learn better manners," said Billy Lade coolly. The man on recognizing a foreigner

drew back, muttering something under his garlic-reeking breath, which might have been an apology or might have been an imprecation.

The frightened driver was now questioned. He replied that he had seen a man running rapidly down the alley on the left, where he had disappeared, he thought, in one of the houses.

"This way!" yelled a voice. The next minute the street was deserted save for the cart and its occupants.

"Home! And drive like the devil," said Billy Lade.

CHAPTER XVIII

BETRAYED

THE Empress Dowager had slept over-long, which was one of the reasons she was in a bad humour. Also she had dreamed much and the nature of the dreams disturbed her. She had seen a great catafalque borne by all the Imperial Clansmen in the realm, descendants of the mighty Nurhachu. Behind the catafalque appeared two splendid palanquins with tightly drawn curtains of apricot silk emblazoned with the dragon and phoenix. After the palanquins came a long procession of palace eunuchs, holding aloft gaudy honorific umbrellas, upon which were painted in large characters, not only her name, and the name of the young Emperor, but those of Manchu rulers long dead. In the far distance, so far she could not discern their faces, tottered feebly a woman, holding by the hand a little boy. The procession passed through many towns and villages unheeded by their inhabitants, who were gazing half fearfully, half rapturously, at a bird so monstrously large, the tip of each outspread wing was lost in the blue horizon. The bird held in

his beak the seal of state upon which were the characters "lawfully transmitted authority."

The Empress Dowager determined to consult the court astrologers as to the meaning of the dream. She was about to command their appearance within the next hour, when her eye chanced to rest on the forefinger of her right hand. The seal ring which had sparkled there since she had been supreme in China was gone.

She uttered a piercing shriek, then another and another. Eunuchs, slaves, *amahs*, and court attendants waiting without rushed in alarm to her bedside. A-lu-te and Chou-Chau, who had just been relieved from their long night vigil and were hastening to their pavilion, turned and ran back. They found the Empress Dowager sitting up in bed, waving away the frightened servant holding her usual morning bowl of lotus-root porridge.

"My ring!" she screamed, "my ring is gone; it has been stolen while I slept." Her beautifully modelled little hand was outstretched; the jade ring which had always adorned that perfect hand was no longer there. All were aghast. The faces of the night watchers went white with terror. Chou-Chau trembled like a fragile reed in a wind; she began to cry. The Empress Dowager turned upon her in savage anger and exclaimed, "That woman is the guilty one; gaze on her all of you and tell me if she acts not like a detected thief."

"*Jur*" (yes), they said, glad to have the Old Buddha's wrath concentrated upon one person.

Only Chou-Chau, almost dead with fear, and A-lu-te remained silent.

"Where is my ring?" shrieked the Empress Dowager. Chou-Chau fell on her trembling knees and, sobbing more violently than before, protested her innocence.

"Call the Chief Eunuch," commanded the Empress Dowager. "He will know how to deal with her and obtain a confession."

"He went to Peking at the hour of the Tiger," said a eunuch knocking his head on the floor.

"Let this woman be locked up then till he returns." Two eunuchs seized the wretched Chou-Chau and were dragging her off, when A-lu-te, pointing to the left hand of the Empress Dowager, said boldly, "Great Old Ancestor, the ring is there; your Majesty no doubt changed it in your sleep."

The Empress Dowager looked. On the second finger of her left hand she saw the jade seal ring. Intense relief blended with suspicion and surprise showed on her face, but she did not speak. Her eyes glanced from the ring to the people around her, then sank to the floor. All felt her silence to be ominous. The sigh of relief which had breathed from their hearts when they saw the ring was already stifled. No one moved. The eunuchs who were dragging Chou-Chau from the room stood still, their grasp on the sick girl loosened. Every eye was turned toward the Old Buddha,

as if something were about to happen, something unusual and to be dreaded.

At last the Empress Dowager spoke. Her voice was quiet, too quiet A-lu-te thought, as she tried to still the throbbing in her veins.

"Where," said the Empress Dowager, not lifting her eyes, "where did that mud come from?"

They saw now that she had been staring at small mud marks on the floor; they blinked their amazement, and mutely echoed her question, "Where did the mud come from?"

The Empress Dowager's fastidiousness was only too well known. Her abhorrence of anything even remotely suggestive of dust and dirt was a pronounced characteristic of her nature, and that portion of the Palace reserved for her special occupancy was kept immaculately clean. Such a thing as mud stains in the imperial bedchamber was inconceivable. Eunuchs, *amahs*, and court ladies could scarcely believe the evidence of their eyes.

"That," said the Empress Dowager slowly, pointing to the stains, "that was brought in here this night."

She looked around at her attendants, her bright eyes snapping. "All who watched in my room, come forward," she commanded.

The eunuchs, *amahs*, and slave-girls promptly ranged themselves in a line before her bed. Chou-Chau came also, her face pitifully white and drawn, her eyes like those of a frightened animal. A-lu-te placed herself beside Chou-Chau.

"You will each examine the shoes of the one beside you and report upon their condition," said the Empress Dowager.

The eunuchs began; the report, always favourable, finally reached Chou-Chau. She, poor thing, was looking blankly down at A-lu-te's dainty, embroidered shoes. They were stained, spattered with mud. She began to cry again helplessly. A-lu-te had been her only friend in the Palace, the only one who ever spoke a kind word to her, and she could not bear the thought of accusing her.

"Well," the Empress Dowager flashed out at her, "are your silly eyes blind, or has your tongue lost its power of speech?"

"There is mud upon her shoes," she faltered in a voice so low it was almost inaudible. She clutched at her throat.

"What does the creature say?" blazed the Benign Mother.

"She says there is mud upon my shoes," said A-lu-te, while she clasped Chou-Chau's arm firmly to prevent the girl from falling.

The Empress Dowager turned to A-lu-te.

"Is it true, child?" she asked with unexpected gentleness.

"It is true."

"Why did you leave your post last night and where did you go? Speak freely and do not dissemble."

"After the Great Old Ancestor found rest in

slumber last night, her handmaiden Wang-ti ceased her ministrations, yet remained near the sacred couch, prepared to watch there till dawn. But Chou-Chau, whose sickness is truly great, choked with the cough which she was trying to suppress. Her face grew purple, her eyes bulged from her head, and, fearing she would pass away, your handmaiden sped out into the dark night, to the marble steps leading to the lake, and dipped her handkerchief into the water, then returning moistened Chou-Chau's face. This is the explanation of the marks upon the shoes of the Great Old Ancestor's handmaiden"; she ceased speaking. Her lovely dark eyes were lowered, while her slender form stood erect as a young willow, giving her an air which was at once deferential, modest, and fearless.

"How pretty she is," the Empress Dowager almost spoke her thoughts aloud. Then she looked at Chou-Chau, whose sickly pallor could not be disguised by the heavy coating of red paint on her thin cheeks.

Tzŭ Hsi had never cared for Chou-Chau; the girl was stupid and stupid people always brought out the worst in her nature; her indifference had gradually grown into positive dislike. She was glad of an excuse to throw all the blame upon Chou-Chau. Her tone changed, it became sharp, abrupt, angry.

"So it is you who are to blame; you wanted water, and in your boundless selfishness you

curbed your foolish cough till you frightened Wang-ti and caused her not only to run the risk of drowning, for the night was dark, and the lake deep by this pavilion, but you also hoped to draw upon her head the punishment which you merited. I will see the Chief Eunuch about you later. Go to your room."

The frightened girl obeyed. Steps were heard in the outer room; the silk curtains were raised and Li himself appeared. An air of suppressed excitement was apparent in him. Chou-Chau heard the Empress Dowager call out, "You did not go to Peking after all? It is well, I need you this morning."

One long deep shudder passed over Chou-Chau; then she crept slowly back to her room.

The Chief Eunuch approached close to the Empress Dowager and in a low, confidential voice told her that, before he had gone far on the road to Peking, he fell in with a Manchu official, also bound for the capital, and had conversation with him. The nature of this conversation was such that he desired the official to return with him forthwith to the Summer Palace. He was now outside the gates awaiting permission to be received in audience.

"Who is this official?" asked Tzŭ Hsi.

Li leaned forward and whispered the name in her ear. When he straightened himself again he turned his head slowly to look at A-lu-te out of little eyes that gleamed with malignant triumph.

A-lu-te felt suddenly weak; the pulse beat oppressively in her temples. Who was this Manchu official and what had he told the Chief Eunuch that he should return in haste to the Palace, bringing the man with him?

"I will give him audience within the hour," announced the Empress Dowager. "Hsiao Kuniang," she said gaily to A-lu-te, "go and put on your loveliest gown, I want you to look your best this morning when I send for you. I will give you an ornament for your hair. Bring me box two on the first shelf in the jewel room."

The jewel room adjoined the Empress Dowager's bedroom; it was lined from floor to ceiling with shelves covered with rows upon rows of ebony boxes, their numbers indicated on yellow strips of paper pasted on the covers. More than three thousand cases containing Tzŭ-Hsi's jewels were kept in this room. A-lu-te found box two; she held it a moment in her hands till she could still their trembling, then returned to the bedroom.

The Empress Dowager commanded her to open the little ebony box. It contained a jade and coral lotus flower beautiful in form and colour; the petals delicate, graceful, languishing as those of the natural flower. It was a wonderful specimen of the artistic skill of Chinese workmanship.

"Do you like it Hsiao Kuniang?" asked the Empress Dowager with her winning smile.

"The Great Old Ancestor overwhelms her unworthy handmaiden with her gracious munifi-

cence," said A-lu-te, and falling on her knees, kowtowed repeatedly. The emotion in her voice might readily have been caused by her joy at receiving so beautiful a gift.

"I knew you would like it, it will show to advantage in your dark hair. Go, now, and dress; put more paint on your lips and cheeks; I do not want you to look like a widow." And, smiling, sweet-faced, as one whose life is passed in giving joy to others, the Empress Dowager waved her little hand in dismissal.

A-lu-te left the room, carrying the ebony box which held the jade and coral lotus flower. Her soul was sick with fear. As she passed the Chief Eunuch, she saw him smile. There was something horrible in that smile. When she reached her pavilion, she was relieved to find that Ho-Shu, the eunuch who replaced S'ang as her attendant, was not there. She not only disliked, but distrusted him. She heard Chou-Chau feebly calling and, throwing the ebony box hurriedly on the K'ang, went to the girl's room. Chou-Chau was lying on the floor; she looked like a broken flower. A-lu-te half dragged, half lifted her to the K'ang.

"Wang-ti," said Chou-Chau, in a faint voice, "you have been good to me. I have been in the Palace two years, and during all that time, no person has spoken a kind word to me until you came. Your presence has cheered and comforted me. I am going to die and I want to thank you."

"You will not die, dear Chou-Chau; you are

weak now and exhausted, but that will pass," replied A-lu-te, striving to encourage her.

"Oh," exclaimed the girl in a piteous voice, "do not say so; the thought that I will pass away quietly with no one near but you is sweet to me, sweeter than you can possibly know, for you have not been made to suffer as I have here. In this dreadful place lurked death always for me. When the sounds of merriment were gayest, when singing and laughter were loudest, they could not drown the distant echo of death's stealthy tread, coming nearer and ever nearer, and my heart would grow cold as I listened, I shuddered and was afraid, always afraid."

"Poor Chou-Chau," said A-lu-te pityingly.

"Now I am afraid no more. Bend your head lower—so—I want to ask you before I die—is it true you went to the lake to fetch water for me last night?"

"No."

"I thought so, though I could not be sure, for my sickness does at times make me so faint, I often do not know what takes place around me. Tell me—" she raised herself up to peer into A-lu-te's face and her voice sank to a mere breath, "were you trying to escape from the Palace and returned because you could not?"

"No."

"Yet I know you hate it here, for all that Lao Tsu Tsung is so good to you; I have watched your face when we were alone and I know."

"Yes, I hate it here," said A-lu-te with subdued energy, "and if I could, I would escape this very hour, this very minute."

"Listen—put your ear close to my mouth—my strength is fast failing and I must tell you something."

A-lu-te bent her head till her shell pink ear touched the bloodless lips of the dying girl. "I have hidden in the firehole of the K'ang a box—in it is a Lama's gown and hat and the bald headpiece. I stole them one day from the rooms where the theatrical wardrobe is kept. I meant to escape from here disguised as a young Lama, but my courage always failed. Now I am dying,—I shall not need the dress; take it and may Buddha help you to get safely away."

"Chou-Chau, dear Chou-Chau, don't die—we will escape together—we will go this very night."

"Yes, we will go tonight, but not together, dear White Jade. This little cicada, called Chou-Chau, will soon shake off her shell and fly away, and not even the wicked Li Lien Ying or Lao Tsu Tsung can prevent the flight. But I would you were already safe outside these dreadful palace walls."—She sighed and her thin transparent hand stroked feebly A-lu-te's glossy hair.—Suddenly she raised herself. "Listen!" she whispered, "I hear footsteps coming this way. Oh, dear White Jade, hasten, take the box now while we are alone—carry it to your room."

To quiet her A-lu-te took the box from its hiding

place, and hurrying to her own room, thrust it inside the K'ang.

The quick, sharp patter of swift-stepping feet drew nearer, then stopped before the pavilion.

A-lu-te peeped from the window and was aghast to see the Empress Dowager, assisted by the Chief Eunuch, descend from her chair. Why had she come?

A-lu-te experienced a sudden tightening of the heart. The outer door was flung open. The next minute the coarse ugly face of Li Lien Ying appeared holding apart the curtains of her room. His expression was suave and cruelly knowing. The loudest sound in the room was A-lu-te's heart beating turbulently. The Empress Dowager swept in like a whirlwind. The two women, one of them young and beautiful; the other, older, possessing an attraction greater than beauty, faced one another an instant. Then A-lu-te sank on the floor making an obeisance. A glance at the Empress Dowager's face was sufficient to show she was in a towering passion.

"Miserable and worthless one!" she cried furiously, "you have been caught in your lies, tied up in your deceits. I know all. Your vile, unutterably despicable deception has been uncovered. Your name is a lie, your presence in my Palace a lie, your words lies. You are not Wang-ti the daughter of Lord Ko Lin Ch'in, for she died two years since—he, himself, has been here and trembles with rage and sorrow

that his name should have been put to such base uses. What have you to say? Speak!"

The storm had broken. A-lu-te bowed her head before it. She was benumbed with fear. She had often tried to prepare herself for this moment, knowing it would come, sooner or later, but always she had cherished a hope, faint though it was, that she would make good her escape before the dreaded hour arrived. Now she was face to face with it, she seemed to be looking into a black bottomless pit, on the narrow brim of which she was vainly endeavouring to maintain her balance.

"Do you hear? Speak!" commanded the Empress Dowager. But A-lu-te could not speak, her tongue refused to answer the summons of her will. The eyes of the Chief Eunuch blinked with vindictive joy.

"Her tongue is tied, Old Buddha," he said; "this wench who 'smiles in public' has, it would seem, some sense of shame left in her, even though she has long been but a broken melon."

A wench who smiles in public! A broken melon! The hot blood mounted to A-lu-te's cheeks. To be called a common courtesan by this eunuch!

An insensate fury possessed her. She sprang to her feet; she had of a sudden no more fear of these two than she had of Chou-Chau or any other miserable wretch within the Palace. Petrified but a moment since with terror, she now was prepared to spend her strength against stone walls, against mountains and stormy tides, to do battle

with the whole world arraigned against her, as indeed it was at that moment, as far as her situation was concerned. She fastened her flashing eyes on the Empress Dowager; her head was thrown back; with her forefinger she pointed at the Chief Eunuch. "Does your Majesty permit a creature who is fit only to sweep floors, who is despised by the lowest coolie in your realm, does your Majesty permit so vile a thing to give expression to his low lies?"

The Empress Dowager was dumbfounded; she stared at her as if in a stupor.

But rage shook the Chief Eunuch, from his mouth came a sound more like the roar of a wild beast than a human voice. He sprang forward with raised hand to strike A-lu-te. She turned swiftly towards him. "Back, dog!" she cried furiously. "Back to your place. Make haste. Your tail has wagged once too often." Li glared at her with murder in his eyes, yet the raised hand sank to his side. Her commanding eyes, her imperious voice seemed to be driving him step by step back to his place by the door, where he stood, unable to stem the torrent of abuse which burst from her lips. She reviled him savagely, every word bore a sting sharp as a scorpion's, her wrath was appalling in its fierceness.

The Empress Dowager stood like a figure of stone with living eyes fixed upon the girl as if she were trying to engrave her features upon her very soul and compare them with the features of one

she had always known. Something vague, an intangible thought far back in her mind, tormented her. She could not clutch it; it refused to answer her imperious will and come boldly from its lurking place. The lines about her mouth were pathetic; fear, hope, wonder shone in her eyes.

Not until the torrential storm of words had ceased to flow from A-lu-te's lips, did she speak.

Her own words came with an effort, her voice shook and was low.

"Who are you?"

A moment of silence ensued. It was if the two women had suddenly changed places.

Tzŭ Hsi was no longer the all-powerful sovereign, divinely angry, but a woman, weak, pale, harassed, with some hidden emotion; while A-lu-te, quiet now, since her burst of passion, stood like a young empress, unterrified, erect, and haughty.

"Who are you?" faltered the Empress Dowager again.

"The adopted child of Duke Tsing, to whom was sent by imperial decree the silken cord of self-despatch."

"Tsing?" Tzŭ Hsi puckered her brows like one trying to recall a long forgotten incident.

But the Chief Eunuch started violently. In a flash he remembered a certain lacquer box in his private apartment where he kept documents of various sorts and where he had tossed contemptuously a memorial from the condemned suicide Tsing, addressed to the Empress Dowager. The

bearer of the memorial had not been supplied with sufficient taels to pay Li, and the Chief Eunuch, who was a stickler in regard to claiming the exact amount of his "squeeze," had not troubled himself to present the memorial, or even, as was his custom, to read it.

For once in his life he regretted the greed which influenced so many of his acts and which, on this occasion, had caused him deliberately to forget a document containing, it might be, important disclosures concerning the Manchu girl.

He now addressed the Empress Dowager in his usual unceremonious manner.

"It is plain, Old Buddha, why this woman sought to thrust herself into the Palace. With evil heart she thought to kill you, and so be revenged for the death of Tsing whom you leniently permitted to commit suicide, although his crime merited capital punishment. Your escape, Old Buddha, has indeed been miraculous. If I had not chanced upon Lord Ko Lin Ch'in this morning and conducted him here to repeat to you that which he already had imparted to me, this wicked woman might even today have found occasion to accomplish her accursed crime."

By accusing A-lu-te of plotting against the life of the Empress Dowager, Li wanted to accomplish three things,—divert the attention of Tzū Hsi from the girl's striking resemblance to herself when mastered by passion; inspire again in A-lu-te's breast the fear which had so strangely fled from

it; and lastly to change the trend of the Empress Dowager's questions concerning A-lu-te's parentage.

He was successful. His words roused Tzŭ Hsi; she shook off the spell which bound her. "Is it true, girl, you came here to seek my death?" she cried.

Upon A-lu-te, the eunuch's accusations had wrought even a greater change than he had dared hope. Her look of haughty defiance and anger vanished. She no longer stood erect and unafraid, but, uttering a cry of horror, sank upon her knees. "Oh, no, no, no," she sobbed, "he lies most hideously, most shamefully. Your handmaiden could never be guilty of such depths of wickedness. She could no more cherish such sinful thoughts against your Majesty than she could plot against the life of her own mother were she still blessed with one."

The Empress Dowager impulsively took a step forward, while a softened look crept into her face.

The Chief Eunuch clenched his hands under his long sleeves. This was not what he had expected. He plucked the Empress Dowager's gown. "Be careful, Old Buddha," he warned her with pretence of anxiety. "Go not near her. Ask her instead why she forced herself into the Palace if she came not to commit the foulest and blackest of crimes."

"Aye," said the Empress Dowager gloomily, "what brought you here?"

"Your handmaiden will tell all," cried A-lu-te

vehemently, "and the Great Old Ancestor can judge if what she says bears not the seal of truth. In the house of your servant, Duke Tsing, lived his secretary, who had a son, but little older than your handmaiden. His name was Fen-Sha."

The Empress Dowager started and frowned angrily, while Li hid a satisfied smile at the unexpected disclosure.

"From their childhood," continued A-lu-te, "they played together and were constant companions. When he was sent to school, your handmaiden besought her father by adoption to permit her to study the same lessons which were given to her playmate, for she did not want him to become wiser than she and perhaps grow to scorn her, for already she loved him beyond all else in the world." She stopped, sighed heavily, and began again as if talking to herself: "Those were days of happiness, dream days, bright as the glowing pomegranate, sweet as the ripe persimmon. Then came a time when my father offered to send Fen-Sha to the Western land, America, to complete his education, because of his scholarly abilities, which were great. My father attached one condition to his offer,—that Fen-Sha upon his return should devote his talents for the benefit of his countrymen. Fen-Sha promised eagerly and prepared to take the long journey across the seas. But I wept as I had never wept before and would not be comforted. My grief touched Fen-Sha, for he loved me only a little less than I loved him.

He begged my father to promise me to him in marriage. My father at first refused, there were reasons connected with my birth which he declared made a union between us impossible. But Fen-Sha pleaded; he cared not, he said, whether I were slave or princess, he loved me and would wed none other, and I made a vow that if he continued to withhold his consent, I would seek death by starvation. Seeing us so determined, my father, after long deliberation, finally yielded, and we became affianced. It was agreed that our marriage should not take place till a year after Fen-Sha had completed his foreign education. The years were long during which he was gone and only his letters came to brighten the dull weary days. I lived for those letters; they were like food and drink to my hungry heart. All waiting has an end. Fen-Sha came home. He spent the year my father had stipulated should pass before we married, in organizing clubs over the country, north and south, for the propagation of progressive ideas, social and agricultural, among the people."

The Empress Dowager had listened in silence to A-lu-te's story, but now she broke in angrily: "He was a base traitor, roaming over my realm, disseminating false and turbulent doctrines, attempting to destroy the solidity of the Empire and create party factions and defame the jade name of his sacred sovereign."

"His voice was never raised against your Majesty," declared A-lu-te firmly.

"Talk not of what this man did—you can tell me nothing I do not already know. He was caught and has paid the penalty of his wickedness and died the death of a low-born criminal."

A-lu-te looked up at the Empress Dowager and said slowly, solemnly, exultantly, "Not so, he lives!"

"He lives?" repeated the Empress Dowager angrily. "Aye in hell where he belongs. Go on with your tale, girl—make it short."

"Your handmaiden will be brief. When Fen-Sha was imprisoned and sentenced to ignominious death, she wept tears of blood. But tears, even though they flow long enough to flood the land, cannot drown a sorrow; then she conceived a project. It was a mad one, but the ache to save him had brought her to that state of mind which is ready for any deed, no matter how strange or how difficult. She sought her father and told him of her plan. As she unfolded it, he gazed at her strangely and, when she had concluded, exclaimed: Buddha himself wills it, he has planned it so! Go, my child, but I enjoin upon you to use your utmost endeavours not only to win the love of the Empress Dowager, but to love her yourself, even though you fail to obtain Fen-Sha's pardon and he dies, as I, your father by adoption, must die. Remember, it is not she who is to blame, she is a great woman; her faults are not her own, but China's. Love her and honour her always.' He went to a cabinet and opening a secret drawer took

from it a paper. Holding it in his hands, as though about to give it to your handmaiden, he reflected deeply, then returned it to its place again. 'I intended giving this document into your keeping. I have long prepared it. It concerns you. But now I think it will serve you best if I include it in the memorial I shall write to the Empress Dowager the day I die. Be not afraid, go in peace. You have been a dutiful daughter to me; your future will be happy.' Weeping, your handmaiden bade him good-bye. How she passed herself off as the daughter of the Lord Ko, it is not necessary to relate. She thought to influence your Majesty to pardon Fen-Sha. But she soon became convinced of the futility of such a hope."

A-lu-te paused.

"So," said the Empress Dowager, "that was in your mind when you took the monstrously audacious step of wantonly usurping another's name to enter my Palace. Such wickedness was predestined not to succeed."

A scarcely perceptible smile flitted across A-lu-te's face. She was convinced of Fen-Sha's safety by that mysterious and unerring knowledge which often comes to deeply loving hearts. Fleeting as her smile had been, the Empress Dowager saw it. With the swiftness of an electric shock passing through her, she understood. "Girl!" she exclaimed, her voice vibrating with amazement, anger, and something she could not define. "It was you who took the seal ring from my hand last

night! What use did you make of it? Answer truthfully or Li shall tear the tongue from your head."

And A-lu-te told, nor did she in the telling omit a single detail of all that occurred that night. On one point only she kept silent; she did not divulge Follingsbee's name, nor the fact that a foreigner had aided her. With a dramatic touch which was an instinct of her nature, she told how she had softly removed the ring, having first soothed the Great Old Ancestor to sleep, and how, having affixed the seal to the order she had previously prepared commanding the immediate release of Fen-Sha, she had attempted to slip the ring back again where it belonged, and failing, because her Majesty had shifted her position while sleeping, she had instead hastily placed it upon the second finger of the left hand, and then hurried out into the night. She told of poling the imperial barge across the lake and of her swift run, skirting the Wilderness Park, to the green and yellow pagoda, where a Pechili coolie, she had previously bribed, awaited her. He took the fraudulent decree and rode that night by pony express to Tientsin. She told how the eunuchs came to bury their dead and she was forced to clamber into an empty niche in the pagoda and sit cross-legged, immovable, like a graven image of Sakya-muni while the eunuchs wailed their death-wail and prayed, and how in the midst of the burial service she had slipped down unobserved and hastened back to the imperial bedroom.

The Empress Dowager listened, absorbed in the recital, fascinated in spite of herself by the courage, daring, and cleverness of this Manchu girl, whose love for her affianced husband, was passionate, impelling, overpowering, a love she too had once known and felt. She pressed her temples with her slender hands, tortured by a memory fixed deep in her heart. A-lu-te's tale had struck an answering chord within her. She also would have risked her life rather than fail of such a purpose. One minute she was ready to forgive the girl, the next, the thought of the deception, the audacious trick she had played upon her, and the thwarting of her imperial will, roused her to fury. But even as she turned to the Chief Eunuch to command the immediate death of A-lu-te, her mood quickly changed again. A piercing pang shot through her heart, as a vision of the girl, dead at her feet, rose vividly before her; it seemed to her that never again would she want anything so much as to bring her back to life.

Emotions, strange, conflicting, took frenzied possession of her. She longed for vengeance, she wanted to see the girl beaten, dragged by her hair about the room, made to suffer every refinement of torture known to the fertile brain of Li, and she wanted to gather her to her bosom, weep over her, caress her.

Suddenly she remembered the memorial Tsing had written, a memorial concerning his adopted daughter. The thought brought with it a certain

calm. The memorial might even now have arrived in the Palace, waiting her perusal. She would read it before deciding upon the fate of the girl. She turned to Li, who during A-lu-te's recital had stood open-mouthed, astounded, and gave her orders.

"Have eunuchs guard the pavilion and follow me to the Throne Room promptly."

Without another word she left the room. At the door the Chief Eunuch turned swiftly back. His small heavy-lidded eyes had an evil glitter in them; he thrust his parchment wrinkled face close to A-lu-te. He snarled at her, showing his yellow teeth: "Tonight you will sleep well, your hands tied behind you; your head inside of them," he laughed noiselessly and went out.

He placed two guards at the front entrance of the pavilion, one at each side and one at the rear, then he hastened to the Throne Room.

He found the Empress Dowager alone. Her attendants had been dismissed. She was pacing the spacious hall with quick, feverish steps.

"Tsing's memorial has not arrived," she called out to him. "Is it possible he failed to send it after all?"

"It may arrive tonight, Old Buddha," said Li soothingly.

Tzū Hsi paused in her restless pacing. "Li," she asked, clasping her hands together to quiet her agitation, "of whom did this girl remind you in her rage?"

"Do you wish me to tell you, Old Buddha?"

"I command you."

"Well, then," he answered coolly, "she reminds me of a tigress gone mad."

Tzŭ Hsi's black keen eyes challenged his. "Think once more, look at me and answer."

The Chief Eunuch had expected this question and was prepared for it. In his youth, a good actor, he had frequently taken part in plays produced in the imperial theatre and delighted the young concubine Yi, now the illustrious Empress Dowager, by his skill and talent. He was still able to assume a part with tolerable success when the occasion offered, or necessity required. His own agitation was great, yet to all outward appearance, he was calm, if not indifferent. He shrugged his shoulders. He must not permit her to suspect that he, too, had seen that startling resemblance, had recognized in the girl calling herself Wang-ti, not only the character and temper of Tzŭ Hsi, but, since his eyes were opened, the handsome features of the dead and gone An Te hai, the false eunuch.

"I do not know; thanks be to Buddha, I never saw the like of her."

"Certainly you are blind!" she cried angrily. Then her voice trembled, tears were in her eyes. "Li, I have been thinking of the past again. My deepest sorrow, my greatest joys lie there. The sweet of the hibiscus, the bitter of the artemisia, I have sucked them both. My words are impo-

tent to express the thoughts that crowd in on me; my head aches and my heart is sore. How shall I get the plant of forgetfulness? In vain I have sought it, the thorn ferns of memory only I find." She sank on a chair and wept softly.

Li dropped upon his knees beside her and gently stroked her gown. "They shall be thorn ferns no more," he said soothingly; "see, I will change them like the magician in the theatre, into the fragrant lotus flowers of memory. Do you recall that day when you and he went sailing on the lake and he sat beside you on the Throne? He sang and played upon the lute and made songs about your loveliness, and indeed your beauty was like the sky at dawn. He swore your eyebrows were like the chrysalis of a moth, and the arch of your dainty foot was the phoenix's crest. Do you remember?"

"Till my hair is white I cannot forget. And later, under the stars, he called me 'night's splendour.' Our love was stable as the mountains, fathomless as the sea. Yet so soon he died and such a death! His glorious head cut off like any common thief! When I think of it cold clouds of horror encompass me."

"Seek consolation in the thought, Old Buddha, that your spiteful colleague, the Eastern Empress,¹ forfeited her own life, when she wrote the decree commanding his decapitation."

"Aye, I poisoned her; the death was too good for her. Do you remember, Li, when my months were

¹ Tzū An.

fulfilled and I was delivered of a daughter—how straight her little limbs, how rosy!—and I again found joy. His child and mine! What rainbow dreams I dreamed of her future!

“I dared not keep her with me, lest rumours of her birth which had gone abroad became verified; but I could see her often and longed for the time when she should be ten years old and I could have her brought to the Palace to remain with me always. She died before one year had crowned her little head, died, they said, of smallpox and I could not even look upon her lying on her tiny cock-crow pillow. Indeed my sorrows have been great and many; my heart is palsied by afflictions. Before the establishment of autumn, the frost falls destroyed my flower-scented happiness.” Her weeping became more violent. The Chief Eunuch, whose affection for his royal mistress was the only good in a character thoroughly evil, sought in vain to comfort her.

“Li,” she said abruptly, “had my little lustrous one lived, she would have resembled the girl in yonder pavilion. Incessantly this thought returns to me, what if—” she paused and looked pleadingly at the eunuch, filled with a hope she did not dare express. Li read her thought, but that which was her hope, was his menace, and his lips remained sealed. He hated A-lu-te with a hatred even greater than he gave to Kuang Hsü and he feared her more. For the young Emperor he feared not at all. That puppet he told himself

would never rule while Tzŭ Hsi lived, nor afterwards either, for he would die when she died, perhaps before. But with the other, it was different; already her influence over the Old Buddha had assumed alarming proportions threatening to rival, then destroy, his own. "Impossible," he said, "do not let your heart cherish a hope so utterly vain. Remember Prince Kung saw the little one in her coffin."

"Aye, but the face so scarred and swollen with the fatal sickness, he might easily have been mistaken and seen some child not mine. Moreover I have never wholly trusted Prince Kung, and not then any more than now, so I sent you to see the child."

"Yes, I saw her, it was she without the shadow of a doubt. Think no more of it, Old Buddha," pleaded Li.

"I will!" she said hotly. "You do not want a doubt of her death to come to me. And so well I know your vindictive nature, you are filled with fear and anger this minute because my heart yearns strangely for Hsiao Kuniang. She treated you with bitter scorn, with contempt—she called you coarse and ugly, a dog, and the sexless thing you are. No living soul but I has dared speak to you in like manner."

"Nor ever will," he muttered between his teeth; "the shameless one, she shall suffer for those words."

"Bridle your tongue!" said Tzŭ Hsi sharply.

"Not a hair of her head is to be touched till I command, do you clearly understand?"

"Yes."

"I shall decide upon her fate when Tsing's memorial comes. Go, see if couriers have arrived at the outer gate. Make haste."

It was seldom Tzŭ Hsi spoke so curtly to her favourite servant and intimate confidant. Li rose; the flush on his face was succeeded by a livid pallor; he kept his eyes lowered that the Empress Dowager might not see the anger flashing balefully from them.

When he left her presence he did not seek the outer gate but hastened instead to his own pavilion. Entering his private room, where he received and examined all communications addressed to the Empress Dowager before they were presented to her, he first satisfied himself that he was alone, then he locked the door and going to the red lacquer box took from it Tsing's memorial. It had been in his possession over ten days. He spread the document on the table and prepared to read it. He felt anxious and excited. If this girl proved to be, as he himself now entertained small doubt that she was, the daughter of Tzŭ Hsi, his power was gone. The girl's influence would be greater than his; she would exert it to crush him, and perhaps even to chase him from the Palace. He ground his teeth at the thought. He leaned over the finely drawn characters of the memorial and read:

TSING'S MEMORIAL

I, your Majesty's unworthy servant Tsing-Li-Hoh, soon to breathe my last by divine command, present upon my knee this my last memorial. I being disgraced am debarred from addressing the Throne through the proper channels. But the subject upon which your worthless servant ventures to memorialize is grave and pertains to affairs private and personal of your Majesty. Therefore I have urged the magistrate of my native town to forward this document and, without disclosing to him the text, I gave him to understand that it was of paramount importance to your Majesty. He realized that a request from one about to leave the world who in life had never wittingly uttered an untruth or violated the main principles of duty and honour should not be refused. I reverently entreat your Majesty to cast her gracious eye upon this my last utterance. Then I die content.

I pray your Majesty to recall a certain year after his Majesty Hsien-Feng mounted the dragon and ascended on high and in the deep seclusion of your Palace you held the reins of government in your hands. My official duties brought me to Peking. One night a man dressed as a palace eunuch came to summon me to the Yellow City. I went, following his cart in my chair. We descended at a small gate near the East Gate Glorious. Silently I was led to a room in a pavilion near the Palace of Peaceful Longevity where your Majesty resided. I waited for two hours and being but recently from a bed of sickness my fatigue overcame me and I slept.

I was aroused by the entrance of the eunuch and an old woman, whom I later learned was your Majesty's

most trusted *amah*. She carried in her arms a carefully enveloped sleeping infant. The eunuch told me to follow them. We returned to the small gate where my chair and the cart were waiting. The woman and the eunuch entered the cart. We repaired again to my house. Not until we were within my private apartments did the eunuch speak. Then he explained the mystery of these proceedings. He said your Majesty had deigned to confer upon me an inestimable proof of her trust and favour, by giving me charge of an infant of noble birth. The penalty of death, continued the eunuch, would speedily follow any disclosures on my part of the imperial favour.

I received the infant—a girl child of perfect form and rosy health—into my household. I gave it out that she was a foundling picked up on the river bank where she had been left to perish.

A week later, a certain Prince, closely connected with your Majesty, sent for me. He informed me that smallpox was extremely prevalent among the Peking infants and that vast numbers were dead and dying of the scourge and that if the girl foundling, recently brought to my house, succumbed to the disease, I need entertain no fear of bringing down upon myself or upon members of my family the imperial wrath. In fact, he gave me clearly to understand that the death of the infant would be considered not a calamity, but a blessing. Still I pretended not to understand his meaning, whereupon he told me that rumours of the birth of a child in the Imperial Palace had spread abroad; that enemies of your Majesty were making efforts to prove the truth of these rumours, and that if they succeeded in audaciously substantiating the reports, it would be a menace to the

Throne. As royal patriotic servants, he said, it became our duty to protect your Majesty from such a menace.

I asked him if your Majesty had herself expressed a wish or command that the infant should perish. The Prince replied in the negative, but added that the peace and security of the Throne depended absolutely upon the people's belief in the virtue of the ruler, and the infant's continued existence was therefore exposing the Throne to a danger, both unnecessary and avoidable. Calumny, he said, must be hushed.

I had become attached to the girl-child; she was a dainty and dimpling little creature with eyes that laughed when I approached her. I determined she should not die. I lost no time in procuring an infant, recently dead of the smallpox, and sent word to the Prince that the girl-foundling in my house had succumbed to the scourge. He came in haste to see the child, who was too disfigured by the disease to be recognizable. A palace eunuch, sent by your Majesty, came also to look upon her and verify the truth of my report. Both were satisfied. Subsequently I was recalled to my former position in Shanghai. I departed taking the girl-child with me. She grew into a lovely maiden, dutiful to me, her adopted father, a daughter to enjoy and to be proud of because of her intelligence, her good sense and noble character.

Before I fell under the ban of your Majesty's august displeasure, she was betrothed to young Fen-Sha, the son of my late secretary. When the silken cord of self-despatch was sent to me and my family banished, and Fen-Sha was condemned by imperial decree to the lingering death, A-lu-te—for so I named the

girl—sought my consent to journey to Peking, introduce herself into your august presence, and plead for the life of her betrothed.

The audacity of the plan which she imparted to me was transcendent, nevertheless I did not withhold from her my permission to attempt its execution, for it appeared to me that Buddha himself had inspired her with this idea.

I have not to reproach myself with violating the trust imposed upon me by disclosing to her the secret of her birth. She does not know she is your Majesty's daughter. The courage which has helped to make the Dowager Empress's fame great in the land is hers, as is the charm of her personality. Your Majesty will not fail to recognize her. That she may be dealt with leniently by your Majesty and receive the beneficent protection, is my last prayer, my last hope, my last words.

Prostrate before the Throne I present this my memorial.

Li sat motionless, his little eyes glued upon Tsing's memorial. Finally he rose, lighted a lantern, and deliberately held the paper in the flames until it was reduced to ashes. These he carefully gathered, and striding to a large porcelain pot in which an oleander grew, he dug holes in the earth around the roots of the plant and buried the ashes. This done, he unlocked the door, left his pavilion, and sought the outer gates. He inquired of the guards if couriers had arrived; receiving a negative reply, he returned to the imperial pavilion to report the fact.

"No courier has come, Old Buddha. I have sent two guards to ride out on the Peking road and watch for him. Have patience. If Tsing really did memorialize the Throne, his message will arrive today."

CHAPTER XIX

CONCERNING PALACE EUNUCHS AND A PALACE PRISONER

WHEN A-lu-te became convinced that the Empress Dowager and the Chief Eunuch had left the pavilion, she flew to her K'ang and drew out with feverish haste the Lama costume which Chou-Chau had stolen from the theatrical wardrobe.

She adjusted the bald wig over her glossy hair, which she had previously braided and wound about her head. She slipped on the yellow gown and pulled the huge yellow hat well down over her eyes. Then she hurried to Chou-Chau's chamber. She wanted to embrace her friend once more and say farewell. She found her lying as she had left her on the K'ang. A terrible change had taken place in her appearance. Chou-Chau's eyes seemed to be gazing straight at her, but with a fixed and glassy stare. Her jaw had dropped open; where the paint was rubbed from her face the skin had a yellow pallor not seen in life.

Chou-Chau was dead. The wretched little cicada had cast off her shell and flown forth to freedom, flown from the Summer Palace, the prison

which held her for two long dreadful years. With a sob A-lu-te turned to leave the room. The outside door opened. Someone entered the pavilion. A-lu-te held her breath. Was it the Chief Eunuch who had come back? She snatched off her Lama's disguise and thrust it back in the firehole of the K'ang. Then she went into the central hall. A eunuch was peering through the curtains of her room; he was Ho-Shu, the Chief Eunuch's creature.

A-lu-te called sharply to him. He turned with a start; the puzzled expression on his face changed to a satisfied sneer on seeing her.

"Go," she said, "go and——"

"Since when is it permitted prisoners to give commands?" he interrupted insolently.

"Go," repeated A-lu-te, ignoring both his speech and manner, "and announce that the Lady Chou-Chau has passed into the spirit world."

To assure himself of the truth of this statement, the eunuch went into Chou-Chau's room. He soon reappeared and leisurely left the pavilion to seek the Chief Eunuch and report the death. The Lady Chou-Chau had been of no importance in her lifetime; her demise would scarcely excite more interest than that of an insignificant servant. He need not hurry with the news, which he indifferently flung out to the guards, stationed at the pavilion door, as he sauntered off. They in turn shouted it to the eunuchs guarding the sides and rear of the pavilion, at the same time adding that it would not be long before someone else

took up her abode in the spirit world. They all laughed. One fellow with loose, flabby lips said he trusted the dark journey of that other one would not be long delayed, for he had promised the little eunuchs to show them how to sew up the eyelids of their birds and how to place them in open spaces where circling hawks could see them and be lured to swoop down upon them. The sport was good, also the hawks were easily captured by the trick. But if he were compelled to stand all day guarding the pavilion because it had been turned into an "empty chamber" (a prison in the Palace) he would have to forgo the fun, and the little eunuchs would find someone else to help them in their sport.

"If the Old Buddha catches them at it, she will fly into a rage and have them well punished," said another. "Do you remember when Ying caught those crows and we tied lighted firecrackers to their legs and then set the crows free? How high the creatures flew to be sure before the explosion came and how small the feathered pieces were that dropped down upon us! Never have I laughed so much! Unfortunately the Old Buddha happened upon us just then,—her fury was terrific."

"So were the bamboo beatings you received," laughed a third eunuch. They had drawn together as they talked; the eunuchs at the sides and rear of the pavilion were bunched together at one corner in order to converse with greater facility with those guarding the front entrance.

"Have you heard the news about S'ang?" asked one, whose stature was small, though his rotundity was enormous.

"What of the dolt? Has someone peeled the skin of his face again?" (taken all his money).

"No, he is sent to the Winter Palace to be reader to the Emperor."

"Reader! Bah! he has a voice like a croaking raven. That little beast always has luck."

"Well, I, for one, am glad we're rid of him," remarked the third eunuch; "he and I are like this with one another," and the speaker put the knuckles of his forefingers together.

"It's my belief that S'ang is more than half foreign devil," said the short rotund eunuch. "Just before he left we were on night duty at the inner gate. I was speaking to him of that barbarian doctor priest who was killed in Wuchang by the populace because he was caught puncturing the eyes of children with a sharp needle concealed in cotton with which he pretended to heal their sore eyelids. He and other devil doctors, as you all know, use the humours they thus vilely obtain, for medicine. S'ang tried to make me think it was a silly lie, so I drew on the ground with a piece of chalk a cross such as foreign devils hold sacred and told him I would believe it a lie if he would spit on the cross. What think you he did?"

"A wager he spat! We're all good Buddhists here, even S'ang," cried one. "Two hundred cash he spat!"

"Taken!" cried another, "nay more, three to one, he didn't. If his mouth is like his talk, it's too dry to make spittle."

"Ho—excellent!" laughed the first speaker.

"What say you, Pambo?"

The eunuch appealed to was of gigantic proportions, and, while his great muscles were covered with more flesh than becomes an athlete, their strength still seemed prodigious.

The giant growled surlily, "My purse is empty as if it had been washed. How then should I bet?"

The small rotund eunuch winked slyly at the others and said, "Wait till you hear the rest of the story."

They gathered around him with no pretence of keeping to their posts. "Go on—tell us," they cried eagerly.

"Well, S'ang stooped and drew a large ring, then he carefully rubbed out all trace of the cross. 'Now,' he said, 'I have another plan, better than yours. I'll get Pambo—he's on guard in the next court—and I will agree to throw him in a wrestling match, inside this ring—if I fail I'll say that your devil doctor tale is true.'"

"How! That little cricket tried to throw Pambo!" they exclaimed and laughed uproariously at the mere thought. But Pambo turned his back sulkily on his admiring companions and strolled back to his post.

"You know well," continued the first speaker,

"that no one has ever yet been able to stand up against Pambo and that S'ang should attempt it was ludicrous. Well, we called Pambo. When he heard that S'ang wished to wrestle with him, he came, none too pleased that such a cricket should dare challenge him. 'If you are in haste to get your legs broken or your neck cracked,' growled Pambo, stretching himself, 'come on!' 'Wait a moment till I drink,' said S'ang. When he returned he stepped boldly into the ring. Pambo thrust out his monstrous arms to seize him, when, poof! S'ang, who had his pig mouth full of water, squirted it into Pambo's face, and, before he could recover from his surprise, S'ang rushed at him, caught him around the legs, and down he went."

The four eunuchs shouted with laughter.

A-lu-te had listened to their talk with a feeling of repulsion, which later changed to indifference.

Afterwards her attention was attracted, not to the subject matter of their conversation, but to the fact that their voices appeared to reach her from one direction only. She ran to the window which gave on the rear of the pavilion and looked out. A thrill came over her: the guard who had stood beneath this window was gone! Her release was possible now! Should she hasten back to the death chamber for the Lama's gown and hat? She hesitated, but for an instant only. She was fearful lest the eunuch return to his deserted post before she had time to don the garments and so lose what might be her only chance of escape.

Cautiously she pushed open the long, wide window; the distance to the ground was only a few feet. A-lu-te stepped on the sill. She lingered just long enough to assure herself that no one was in sight. Then she jumped. Her feet had scarcely touched the ground when the tall powerful form of Pambo appeared around the corner of the pavilion. He was strolling leisurely back to his post. He stopped, stared at A-lu-te, and, in three long strides, silently seized her. With no pretence of gentleness, he lifted her in his huge arms, swung her once, and deliberately shot her through the open window back into her room. He might have been throwing a cat up in the air for all the effort he expended or noise made.

Stunned by the fall, A-lu-te lay on the floor motionless. After a time she regained consciousness. She felt faint and giddy. With difficulty she dragged herself to Chou-Chau's room. She understood vaguely that her only hope of escape now lay in the Lama's dress. She drew it on mechanically. She intended to hide in the K'ang till the priests came to say their prayers over the body of Chou-Chau, and, when they left the pavilion, step out with them. There was a bare chance that they would not speak to or notice her, that they would take her to be one of themselves.

Moved by a sudden impulse to make obeisance to the spirit of the departed, she dropped on her knees. She had learnt to love as well as pity poor, little, unhappy Chou-Chau. As she knelt she

suddenly stiffened with terror. She had not heard the entrance door open, yet she was aware of the sound of soft footsteps in the room and close behind her. She could not move even had she so desired; now the soft steps stopped; someone was close to her, so close their garments touched. Who was it? Her heart cried out in fear, but the cry did not pass her lips. Slowly, as if compelled by some fearful magnetism, she raised her eyes. The Chief Eunuch stood beside her. His fat lips were drawn away from his teeth in a smile. At sight of him she was seized by a despair that struck to the innermost depths of her soul. Her ice-cold hands trembled under her long sleeves. The silence around them was sepulchral. Even the eunuchs' voices outside had ceased. Why did he not seize her? Why did he remain standing there towering over her kneeling form like a sinister colossus? Was he gloating over her helpless terror? What diabolical torture had he in store for her? She had heard tales from Chou-Chau of Li's dark deeds of cruelty perpetrated in secret chambers of the Palace, tales too horrible to dwell upon. The impulse to shriek aloud became stronger, but her stiffened lips refused to open. Her brain reeled; she felt a sense of faintness stealing over her. By a violent effort she mastered herself. Suspense had become intolerable, she determined to confront him and demand to know what doom awaited her. She rose from her knees. The Chief Eunuch gave no sign of being conscious of her movement. He

was bending over the body of Chou-Chau, apparently engrossed in studying the ghastly face.

"She is even uglier in death than she was when alive," he said brutally, without turning his head, "Well, say your prayers over her—much good may they do her—I go to order the coffin."

He smiled slyly and left the room. A-lu-te felt, rather than saw, the curtain drop behind him. She was alone. She put her hand to her forehead, confused, amazed, breathless. Was it possible he had not recognized her? Fear—and hope—the most tenacious of human sentiments—alternately took possession of her. Would he go to her room, discover her absence, and becoming suspicious of the silent priest, return to the death chamber? She listened with strained attention. The soft footsteps did not linger, they continued down the central hall. She heard the outer door open and Li's voice speaking to the eunuchs. The words "priest's prayers" reached her distinctly. Again despair seized her; surely the guard would tell him that no priest had entered the pavilion! She waited in an agony of suspense, but Li did not return. She crept back to her own room and peered through the curtains of the windows. In the distance she saw Li hurrying off. Scarcely realizing what she did, she went into the hall, threw open the front door, and deliberately, without show of haste, walked out of the pavilion. Here she saw that Li had changed the guards; instead of two eunuchs at the entrance, Ho-Shu

was pacing back and forth. He looked up as she came out, but made no attempt to stop or speak to her. A-lu-te felt a strange uneasiness, an apprehension in this very fact. She wanted to run, but dared not. She passed from the court; the gate was not locked. No one was in sight. She hurried on, traversing court after court, passing eunuchs idly loitering, or intent upon some errand; gardeners at work; tired-eyed slave-girls, hastening to their mistresses. No one noticed the youthful Lama priest walking with bent head, as if engrossed in meditation.

She was approaching the outer and last court of the Palace. Would the sentinels challenge her right to pass the gates? She was ignorant of the rules governing priests dwelling in the Summer Palace. With beating heart she walked on. The gates were very near now; a few steps more and she would be outside the Palace walls. Then she heard the Chief Eunuch's voice behind her.

"What news of the courier?" he called.

"None, Lord of Nine Thousand Years," replied the sentinels obsequiously.

"Open the gates, I would look out on the road." As he passed A-lu-te he turned his head toward her. His small eyes had a look of infinite malice, of subtle mockery in their depths. Slowly A-lu-te followed him. Intense terror had so frozen her power of thought, she had become merely a mechanism propelled onward by an energy that, though withdrawn, was still feebly working. At

the gate, she paused, shivered, unable to move. She felt herself pushed forward. The next minute she was outside of the Empress Dowager's Summer Palace; the gates were closed and locked behind her.

"Sir Lama, if you meet a courier on the road, bid him make haste, we—the Old Buddha and I—are waiting for him."

It was the voice of the Chief Eunuch. He had thrust open a panel in the great centre gate and was gazing after her with a hideous expression of merriment. The panel was closed and the coarse face disappeared. A-lu-te stood still. Why had the Chief Eunuch allowed her to leave the Palace? Was it possible that the Empress Dowager still protected her and that he dared not kill her while she remained inside the Palace walls? There was no doubt in her mind that he was hatching some evil plot against her and intended capturing her outside the Palace grounds. Why, therefore, she asked herself, should she run? Why seek to hide herself from his vindictive pursuit? Was not his wicked eye watching even now her slightest movement?

The sun was hot; a short distance off, stood a clump of trees and bushes. A-lu-te sought the shade and sank despondently on the ground to wait the coming of the Chief Eunuch.

Before her stretched the long sinuous highway leading to Peking. Fields of Kaoliang and scattered villages dotted the broad landscape. In

the bushes near her, a peasant boy was lying prone upon the ground. Something in the rigidness of his attitude attracted her attention. She looked again and more carefully. The boy was dead. A sudden thought came to her and with it hope, which so often sickens and so seldom dies in the human heart, revived within her. She glanced fearfully over her shoulders. The Palace gates were closed, so were the slides in their great panels. No guard was in sight. It might be that Li, sure of his victim, was for a time not watching. She crouched low, close to the dead body.

A few minutes later a young peasant boy emerged from the clump of trees and ran rapidly towards a field of Kaoliang.

From the round tower on the wall, the Chief Eunuch watched the boy disappear among the tall, waving stalks and laughed noiselessly. Then he called his henchman, Ho-Shu, and gave him certain minute instructions.

CHAPTER XX

THE INN OF PEACE AND SECURITY

THE village of Yang-lin lies on the great Pechili plain, halfway between Peking and the Summer Palace. The village consists of a long street lined on each side with a miserable agglomeration of mud houses. Many of them were crumbling away, the ruins serving as refuge for half-starved dogs or myriads of large rats.

Yet the village was not as poverty-stricken as its general appearance seemed to indicate. The inhabitants were fairly well-to-do and their little farms flourishing.

Among the better buildings and conspicuous for its cleanliness, was the Inn of Peace and Security. Its lime-washed exterior made it a landmark in the near countryside and offered an agreeable contrast to the gloomy aspect of the other houses.

The prosperity of the inn of Peace and Security depended upon travellers from the north passing through Yang-lin on their way to Peking. The courtyard of this inn one evening held a noisy assembly of men and animals. With the caravan which had just arrived from the north were two or

three Buddhist bonzes going to the capital to witness a Lama Bokte manifest his power at the noon hour of the next day. The manifestation had been purposely delayed to permit the pilgrims from the north more time in which to reach Peking. Among the shaven-headed bonzes—their bald pates disfigured with small black marks made by the application of hot irons—were wandering Tibetan Lamas, men from Mongolia, men from the Khalkhas, itinerant Chinese traders, pawnbrokers from the neighbouring villages ready to prey upon the simple ingenuous north country men, for, in commercial intercourse, the Chinese consider the Tartars legitimate and natural subjects for fleecing.

Among the guests was our fat little Mongol friend, the owner of Lla, the racing camel. His tents were pitched outside the village; he had left them in charge of his servant while he paid a visit to the host of the Inn of Peace and Security. The innkeeper had formerly resided in Tartary and, having prospered there, had returned to China and established himself in his native village with his Mongolian wife. The little Mongol bustled about the inn full of interest and curiosity concerning the affairs of others, especially their culinary preparations, which he did not hesitate to examine and criticize. He lifted the lids from pots, dipped his finger in the contents, and carefully licking it, advised either the addition of some condiment or a little less salt or meal or a little more garlic.

The guests who were preparing their own food offered no protests to these proceedings. It was otherwise when he strolled into the large kitchen, where the innkeeper's wife was engaged in cooking for guests who had no culinary arrangements. He removed the lid from a huge pot of meat, plunged his hand in and drew out some of the contents, tasted it and commented adversely upon its flavour. She retorted with a swift and brilliant enumeration of his vicious characteristics and the worthlessness of all his ancestors from the beginning of time. Her husband endeavoured to stop her volley of invectives. She turned upon him instead.

"Do you take me for a Chinese woman who slaves all day for her worthless husband, only to receive abuse?" she shouted. "You are a lazy, shameless rogue, passing your time drinking and gambling, while I labour to keep the establishment from ruin."

"You keep the establishment from ruin!" he cried. "Huh! Every day of the year your bitter tongue and evil temper drive travellers from my doors. I call all here to witness if what I say is not true."

The guests to whom he appealed remained silent, exhibiting no sign of interest in the controversy, while the little Mongol calmly proceeded to examine the contents of another pot upon the clay oven.

"It is the cudgel that you need and plenty of it," continued the landlord loudly.

The wife strode up to him with a challenging air.

"Well, since I need the cudgel why do you not give it to me?" She stood with her arms akimbo, close to him. Although she had lived in China many years, she had refused to adopt the dress of the native women, preferring to retain the attire worn by her own country people. It consisted of high leather boots, and a long loose garment fastened at the waist by a girdle. This manner of dress enhanced the masculine appearance nature had originally endowed her with.

"Come," she cried, "cudgel me!"

She looked formidable and the husband, who was a small man, involuntarily retreated. Hereupon the travellers in the room burst into a roar of laughter. Exasperated beyond endurance, the innkeeper sprang forward, and, forgetting his fear of her, planted a formidable box on her ear.

Everyone expected the woman would revenge herself upon her marital corrector of manners and insubordination, by half, if not wholly, killing him. They rose to their feet, ready to separate the combatants. But the woman turned without a word and quietly resumed her interrupted cooking, while the innkeeper loftily pronounced these words: "A husband must know how to maintain peace and order in his household."

During this scene a boy slipped unobserved into the room and squatted on the floor in a corner near the oven. He appeared exhausted from fatigue. When the woman returned to her cook-

ing he addressed her in a low voice: "Give me to eat and a bit of matting to lie on, then let me sleep undisturbed in this corner—I am weary." He held out some money, more than sufficient to pay for a meal and a night's lodging. Had she been less perturbed by the unexpected masterfulness of her meek husband, she might have noticed the slender shape, the small size of the hand which was thrust out to her. She gave him food and he ate with avidity. "Now, the matting, Oh beautiful one." The woman gave a little grunt of contempt at such flattery, though manifestly it pleased her. She flung him a piece of matting; he covered himself with it and went to sleep.

The Mongol seated himself at the long table with the other guests and ordered a bowl of the mutton stew he had tasted, together with rice, and prepared to enjoy his repast in excellent company. He drew forth his snuff-bottle, suspended from his girdle, and offered it to his neighbours. They took a pinch and in turn offered him their snuff-bottles. They exchanged questions and answers customary among travellers.

"Did you travel in peace?"

"I travelled in peace."

"Has your honourable journey been long?"

"It has indeed been long."

"Where did you come from?"

"From Wang-po."

"That is in Northern Mongolia, is it not?"

"Yes; it is also where the Bokte Lama comes

from who is to manifest his power tomorrow in Peking."

"What will he do besides collecting all the money people will give him for his Lamasery in Tartary?" asked the Chinese pawnbroker with something of a sneer.

"I have said he will manifest his power."

"Well, I, for one, do not believe he has any power different from our Pechili bonzes. There was one who built himself a little booth outside my cousin's shop in Peking and he nailed his cheek to the door of the booth and stood there for an entire week. He had a sign up telling the people he had made a vow not to remove the nail until he had raised a certain sum of money to repair his temple in the Eastern Hills. At the end of the week, when he collected more than half the sum, he died, still standing with his cheek nailed to the door. What power did he manifest? None! Any one can do as much!"

"Doubtless you speak the truth concerning the Chinese bonzes, but with the Bokte Lamas in my country it is different. I, myself, have made the pilgrimage to the Lamasery of Rache-tchurin to witness the manifestation which took place there two years ago."

"Well, and what took place?" asked the pawnbroker, skeptically.

"The Bokte killed himself, yet did not die," returned the Mongol solemnly.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed several voices from the

other end of the table. "We have heard that in the Lamaseries of Tibet and Mongolia there are Lamas who perform miraculous operations. What did this Bokte Lama you saw?"

"Brothers, I will relate what I witnessed," said the Mongol. "Many pilgrims journeyed that year to the Lamasery I spoke of. When the appointed day came, we assembled in the great court of the Lamasery. An altar was raised before the temple gates. The Lamas ranged themselves in a circle around the altar and recited aloud invocations to Buddha. The Bokte appeared. He was a young man, weak and thin from many days of fasting. He did not belong to the higher ranks of Lamas, though his piety had brought renown to the Lamasery. He seated himself on the altar and took from his girdle a long, sharp knife which he laid on his knees. He sat there quite immovable like an image of stone. The Lamas prayed louder and louder and faster and faster, till it was like a whirlwind of sound we listened to. The prayers ceased of a sudden. The Bokte trembled violently, then sprang up, threw aside his garment, and, with his sacred knife, ripped wide his stomach from top to bottom. The blood squirted high, then flowed like a river swelled from the rains. We pilgrims prostrated ourselves before the pious spectacle; many interrogated the Bokte concerning events hidden from mortal eye and all of them he answered. The prayers of the kneeling Lamas were then resumed, but quietly, softly. The Bokte

passed his hand rapidly over his wound to close it. He wrapped his garment about him, recited a prayer, and disappeared behind the doors of the temple, perfectly healed and stronger in body than before."

The Mongol ceased speaking.

"Wonderful! wonderful!" exclaimed his listeners.

"Wonderful indeed; you may witness a like miracle in Peking tomorrow," said the Mongol.

"We will go to witness it," they cried in chorus.

Only the pawnbroker shook his head. "Go, if you wish, you will have your trouble for nothing. The young Emperor will not permit the manifestations. My cousin, he who lives in Peking, says the Solitary One has now forbidden Buddhist zealots to collect money in the capital by public exhibitions of self-mutilations."

"Your cousin's talk is foolishness," declared one of the travellers. "Does he live in Peking and yet not know what all the world knows, that, though Kuang Hsü reigns, he does not rule? Now, if the Old Buddha wishes to stop this manifestation it will be stopped, you may be sure, and not otherwise."

"The Benign Mother would never decry the merit and sanctity of the holy priests of Buddha, or interfere with their sacred spectacles," cried a traveller from the Khalkhas.

"Bah! The Benign Mother will do exactly as she pleases without regard to any one's merits or sanctity."

"Well, I care not whether the manifestations take place or not; I have business in Peking. I go to sell some fine camels in the Mongol market."

This reminded our little Mongol friend of his parting with his Bactrian camel, and he proceeded to relate to the company the events of the previous night, telling them in detail of his conversation with the stranger who had come to his tent and who had offered to purchase Lla, an offer promptly rejected, and, finally, of the wager that they had made. The men were interested. "What did the stranger call himself?" they asked, amazed that any Chinese would try to ride a racing camel, and, moreover, for a distance of three hundred *lis* in one day.

"I do not know his name; he was neither Tartar, Tibetan, nor Chinese—he may have been a Dchia-hour (from India)—his country lies to the West."

"Ho!" said a Chinese merchant with infinite scorn, "you do not know his name or country and expect him to return with your camel and pay his bet! Truly you Tartars are easily gulled."

"He will return—moreover he paid the full price of the camel, though Buddha is witness I did not sell my Lla! Also he left with me this." He drew a large gold watch from his pocket and proudly demonstrated its manner of announcing the hour in the dark. All were impressed; even the Chinese pawnbroker admitted that the watch was of marvellous mechanism and valuable. Just then a loud voice was heard in the court.

A shrieking and protesting bonze burst into the room followed by some half dozen Bannermen. They seized him, tearing his clothes in the struggle, and were apparently endeavouring to peel the skin from his dirty bald pate.

"Will you allow this wickedness?" he yelled, "See, so have they treated every priest of us out there—rent our garments, scratched and torn our heads, sacrilege unspeakable—and for what I ask, for what? Because we are disciples of the Holy One, because we heal the sick with prayers, because we—" he choked with rage and could not continue.

No one came to his assistance. The little Mongol indeed was horrified at such treatment being accorded a man of Buddha. He rose precipitately and would have rushed to the rescue had not the men on either side of him held him down.

"Keep your seat!" they whispered a good natured warning in his ear. "These are Bannermen of the Heavenly Tiger Corps stationed near the Summer Palace, arrogant, reckless rascals, whose ill-will you had best not excite. Besides, it is but a dirty, stinking bonze after all."

Most Chinese entertain the liveliest contempt for those who enter the idle life of the priesthood, whether these be Lamas from the great Lamaseries of Tibet and Tartary, or begging bonzes, or priests from the rich Buddhist temples scattered over the land. The Mongolians and Tibetans, on the contrary, are a devout people and regard the

men "who leave their families" to serve Buddha with a degree of veneration seldom, if ever, accorded them elsewhere.

The Bannermen, after satisfying themselves that the bonze's bald pate was not removable, threw him contemptuously aside. He gathered his torn raiment around him and showered curses on the Bannermen as fast as his tongue could waggle.

"Throw that squealing pig out!" ordered the big corporal. The bonze was seized and summarily ejected.

Then the Bannerman inspected the men at the table.

"Well," said the merchant, "what do you think of us?"

"That!" retorted the big corporal snapping his thumb and forefinger under the merchant's nose.

"Sir Soldiers!" said the landlord stepping into the room and bowing obsequiously, "my humble establishment is greatly honoured by your presence. What do your eminent distinctions command to eat?"

"Think you we have come to eat in your vile inn, fellow? No! we come to seek one who has fled from the Summer Palace disguised as a Lama."

"A eunuch no doubt," said the pawnbroker; "they are always running away."

"This time it was a woman," volunteered the corporal.

"A slave-girl?"

The big corporal laid his finger on the side of his nose. "Do you think Li Lien Ying would raise such a hue and cry over a slave-girl?"

"Give command to your men that they search the village, Sir Captain, while you remain and share with me my food and relate this latest affair of the Palace," urged the pawnbroker, whose relish was keen for scandal.

The corporal's smile of complaisance showed that the compliment of being taken for a captain had gone home.

He issued his orders to the five Bannermen, then threw himself on the bench by the table and proceeded to eat from the pawnbroker's bowl with such unconstrained heartiness of appetite that the latter was disconcerted and already repented of his invitation.

"Well, what of the woman?" he asked sulkily.

The soldier tipped the bowl up and drank with loud suction the sauce from which he had eaten the succulent morsels of meat and garlic. He wiped his greasy chin on the back of his hand, coughed violently, spat out a bit of bone which had come near to choking him, then said coolly, "What of her? How should I know? Li tells no more than he chooses and this time it was precious little."

"Is it for that you have devoured my food?" cried the pawnbroker angrily. "Beyond question, your conduct is shameless."

"Softly, softly," said the Bannerman, rendered good humoured by his free repast, "consult the

dictates of reason instead of getting into a temper about nothing. I have said that Li's tongue was silent, but is his the only tongue that wags in the Summer Palace? Among the eunuchs is one I know; he presides over the cooks in the Old Buddha's kitchen and from him I learnt this—the woman is high in rank and not long in the Palace. The Old Buddha is in a towering rage because she has fled and has given orders that search be made not only in the villages roundabout, but in all the temples on the hills.

"It is rumoured that she stole the Old Buddha's private seal to sign the release of a cursed rebel, Fen-Sha by name, who is condemned to the lingering death, and that she intrigued with some man outside the Palace to carry the decree to the Tientsin Yamen, where this Fen-Sha was in prison. A reward of five hundred taels is offered for the capture of the fellow who carried the false decree. Nothing is known of him, except that he rode to Tienstin like a demon on a racing camel larger than any ever seen here before."

At this all the men shouted and turned with one accord toward the Mongol.

"Oh, the liar! the black-hearted knave! the arrant cheat! Did he not tell me he wanted my camel to carry to a sick friend some life-giving medicine obtained from a Living Buddha!" cried the little Mongol. "He is an enemy to truth. Who now can assure me that I will see my Lla again! May the ancestors hate so great a villain!"

The Bannerman looked at him in astonishment.

"'Twas your camel that he rode, say you?" he demanded. The Mongol now repeated the story he had told the others of the stranger's visit to his tent and of the wager he had made with him. The Bannerman listened with marked attention.

"You are sure he agreed to return within the week with the camel? And meet you at the hotel of the Five Felicities? Very good, I will be there to receive him. Now, listen carefully to what I say: if you would leave this place as happy as you came, keep silent on this matter. And you—and you—and you—" he eyed in turn severely each man seated at the table, "I will arrange for the capture of the fellow and——"

"And claim the five hundred taels reward," murmured the pawnbroker.

The Bannerman appeared not to hear, but continued slowly, distinctly, "And I will not advise the authorities that all of you here have heard of this matter, and should be held as witnesses against him."

To be held as witness is equivalent to being held prisoner in the Yamen, and every Chinese knows the adage advising the dead to keep out of hell and the living to keep out of Yamens.

No other inducement was needed to seal their lips. The soldier waited idly a few minutes, then strolled towards the door. As he opened it, Ho-Shu glided in. The Bannerman started and,

with a half-frightened, wholly deferential air, stood at attention. "What success?" asked Ho-Shu without looking at him; his eyes were searching the room.

"None as yet; I have searched here, my men are now going through every house in the village. I was about to join them even now."

"Imbecile!" said Ho-Shu, and stepped softly past him to the clay oven. He stooped and with a sudden rapid motion raised a piece of matting from the floor. The white face of a boy looked up at him. The men in the room stared in surprise, looked closer and burst into a roar of laughter. This was not a boy, but a young woman, the runaway palace concubine! Here was spice and saki for them! They crowded around Ho-Shu, questioning, exclaiming, commenting. Ho-Shu paid them scant attention except to wave them back, nor did the woman speak. She had fainted. The eunuch picked her up, slung her over his shoulder like a sack of charcoal, and left the room, the court, in a word, left the inn of Peace and Security.

CHAPTER XXI

BACK TO PEKING

BILLY LADE stood by the bed in the guest room of his bungalow, mopping his perspiring brow. He had not found it easy to lift the dead weight of a man of Follingsbee's size and build. Yet he had carried him unassisted from the cart into the house. He had sent his driver post haste after the English doctor, and he had been unwilling to summon the house-boys. Follingsbee's Chinese garb and strange appearance would set them talking and the Yamen had a long ear.

He bent over the silent figure on the bed anxiously, but could see no signs of returning consciousness.

He was at a loss what to do while waiting for the doctor. A vague recollection came to him of having once seen water dashed over the face of a fainting woman; he determined to try the efficacy of this remedy on Follingsbee. He seized a large pitcher of water, and carefully emptied the entire contents over the face of his friend. The result surpassed his best expectations, for the sudden cold shock restored Follingsbee to consciousness. He

opened his eyes and fixed them on the red, perspiring face of Billy Lade.

"All right again, old fellow, eh?" cried Billy Lade delightedly. "Want a towel? Dry yourself; some wet now, but water best thing imaginable when you ain't feeling fit,—taken on the outside, of course—no good whatsoever swallowed."

He seized a large bath towel and began vigorously rubbing the face of his patient.

"Look here—stop that!" gasped Follingsbee feebly and asked, "Where did you come from?" He tried to sit up in bed, but sank back on to the pillows unequal to the exertion.

"Where did I come from? Well, I like that! Where the deuce did *you* come from? What mischief have you been up to now? that's the point. Come now, 'fess up—what have you been a-doin' that you must fall like a log in a dirty alley in the native city in company with a pigtailed chap every foggy old mandarin in the Empire itches to get hold of?"

"Tell me all about it, Lade," said Follingsbee, and Billy Lade related in his own lucid fashion what had occurred from the moment his cart driver was hailed by a panting Chinese in the native city, to the present hour.

Follingsbee listened silently, till Billy Lade came to that portion of his story where he asked the young Chinese if he had a name and what in hell it was.

"Did he tell you?" asked Follingsbee eagerly.

"Rather! D'yer think I'd let a blanky-blank Chinaman refuse to answer a civil question I put to him?"

"Well, the name! What was the name?" In his eagerness Follingsbee again tried to sit up and again fell back on to his pillows. Billy eyed him uneasily.

"Come now, you mustn't do that, you know, you'll be off again and frankly I don't like your looks when you're off. Kinder makes me think of funerals and corpses. Beastly unpleasant things, funerals and corpses—never could abide 'em."

"His name?" whispered Follingsbee weakly, but with insistence in his voice.

"Fen-Sha, the reformer chap," said Billy Lade.

Follingsbee sighed contentedly, closed his eyes, and went healthfully to sleep.

"Well," ruminated Billy Lade, gazing at him, "that's the best thing he can do, also the most aggravatin'. I'd give twenty good silver Mexicans to know what he's mixing himself up for with native reformers."

Then he tiptoed from the room. In the hall the driver awaited him with the information that the doctor was not at home, he had been called on a serious case; the hour of his return was uncertain. Billy Lade did not care; his patient was doing famously owing to his own clever ministrations. In the morning, if necessary, he would send again for the doctor. He threw himself on a bamboo lounge in an adjoining room, and leaving the door

wide open, in case Follingsbee called, went to sleep.

Follingsbee was still soundly sleeping when the next morning Billy Lade roused himself to look in upon him, and he was sleeping when, at high noon, his host came with a boy, bearing a tray laden with tiffin sufficient for three hungry men. The tray was deposited on a table and master and servant softly left the room.

At five o'clock Billy Lade returned from a short canter in the Tientsin Park to find his guest still sleeping, and he was sleeping when he rose from an eight o'clock dinner that night.

"Getting to be sorter stale thing—this sleeping—wish he'd wake up—a fellow naturally wants to talk a bit when he's got a friend staying with him."

At twelve when he tumbled into bed, he said, "If he don't wake himself by ten tomorrow morning, why, by Jove, I'll fetch the doctor to do it for him."

But someone, who was not Billy Lade, or the English doctor, awakened Follingsbee long before ten the next morning.

The night was well advanced when Follingsbee, still soundly sleeping, seemed to hear, as if in a dream, his name repeated over and over again. Notwithstanding every effort he could neither open his eyes nor speak. He experienced that oppressive feeling which comes with a nightmare. Suddenly he felt a violent shock. He knew strong,

implacable hands were laid upon him and that he was being lifted up and cast into a deep dark abyss. He wakened to find himself on the floor by his bed. Someone had lighted a candle. He saw a hideous face peering down upon him. Was he awake or was the nightmare still gripping him? He sprang to his feet to find out and seized the intruder by the shoulders. "You scoundrel——"

"Softly, softly, Follingsbee, you'll rouse the house," said a familiar voice in his ear. "You are a wonderful sleeper; I've been trying to wake you for the last half hour, then was forced to extreme measures. You're none the worse for your fall, I hope?"

Follingsbee drew back and stared at the speaker in amazement. The voice was the voice of Fen-Sha, but the face was that of a wrinkled, yellow-toothed old man.

"Are you——" he began.

The old man nodded laughing. "Yes," he said. "My makeup is good, isn't it? I wouldn't leave Tientsin till I had assured myself that you were all right again and expressed my gratitude; also heard from your own lips how you obtained my release."

Whereupon Follingsbee told him of A-lu-te's wonderful courage and noble self-sacrifice, dwelling as little as possible upon his own share in the dangerous enterprise. His fearful ride on Lla, the Bactrian camel, he passed over entirely.

When he concluded, the young Chinese said

quietly, "It is useless to try and thank you; what you have done for me cannot be repaid by life-long loyalty to our friendship; but from my heart I am grateful to you. Now I must leave."

He rose and going to the window prepared to depart in the same manner by which he had entered.

"Wait a moment," said Follingsbee, "I return to Peking tomorrow. Have you no message to send A-lu-te? It is to her and not to me you owe your freedom." He spoke the last words somewhat sharply, for the young reformer had expressed neither surprise, sorrow, nor gratitude for the girl who had risked, if she had not already lost, her own life to give him his.

"No; why should I send a message?" he asked quietly.

"Look here, Fen-Sha, I don't like to say it, but you're a contemptible brute."

Fen-Sha looked at him in surprise. "Why should I send a message?" he repeated.

"Why? Why, confound you—because—because—" Follingsbee choked with anger, he could not find words in which to express himself. Was it for the sake of this cold callous man that the brave and beautiful Manchu girl had perhaps already given up her life?

Fen-Sha stood with one leg raised on the window-sill, when a thought seemed to strike him. He stepped back into the room. "Did you believe I was not going myself to Peking?" he asked. "I

do not send a message because I shall be the one to take it—and her,” he added softly.

Follingsbee stretched out his hand. “Forgive me for a fool,” he said.

Fen-Sha smiled as he took the hand. “We Chinese do not like to talk to others about our wives and—as you call them over in your country—our sweethearts.”

Then he again started for the window, and again Follingsbee stopped him. “Wait, I am going with you.”

“To Peking?”

“Yes.”

“Travelling with me means risking your life again,” Fen-Sha warned him.

“That’s my affair,” returned Follingsbee and proceeded to dress himself.

“Eat,” said Fen-Sha, pointing to the tray and rightly divining that Follingsbee had taken no food since he was brought into the bungalow.

Follingsbee demolished the food without a second bidding. Then they left the house together.

“Wait for me at the river-bank just outside the North City Gate,” said Follingsbee. “I have some business to attend to before I leave Tientsin.”

“I will wait an hour for you—not longer,” replied Fen-Sha.

No one was abroad at this early hour. They soon left the foreign concession and followed for awhile together the tortuosities of the alleys, misnamed streets, in the native city. Then they

separated, Fen-Sha going on to the river-bank, while Follingsbee sought the Inn of the Blue Sea. He pounded long and lustily on the door. It was opened by a sleepy servant, who asked crossly what he meant by disturbing honest folks at such an early hour. Without replying Follingsbee pushed him unceremoniously aside and hurried into the court looking to the right and left for Lla, the Bactrian camel. The camel was not there. Seizing the astonished servant by the collar, Follingsbee shook him vigorously to rouse in him an appreciation of the importance of the question he was about to ask him. Having, he thought, accomplished the purpose, he demanded to be told what had become of the camel he had left in care of the innkeeper two nights ago. The servant looked at him with a disagreeable smile on his thin pinched lips. "Ah! well! you have arrived. Wait, I will summon the master." With that he made off, while Follingsbee strode up and down the court impatiently. He was about to go after the innkeeper himself, when that worthy appeared.

"Where is my camel?" demanded Follingsbee.

The innkeeper gazed at him with a benevolent expression.

"It is a great happiness to see your Excellency again. Will you step in, noble sir, and repose yourself while my servant goes forth to fetch the camel?"

"Where is she?" asked Follingsbee.

"A most magnificent beast. Ah! I know a fine

camel when I see one, and I took my precautions, for, though my guests are all excellent gentlemen, still an innkeeper must not repose too great confidence in every stranger who comes within his gates. Step inside, step inside, in a little time my servant will bring the camel here."

Something about the man's oily tones aroused Follingsbee's suspicions. Where was the servant going? Not for the camel, he felt convinced of that. Moreover the innkeeper's efforts to induce him to enter the house struck him as unpleasantly insistent. The servant had unbarred the door and was slipping out, when Follingsbee, moved by a sudden impulse, quickly strode up to him and thrust him back into the court. Then he shut the door. "Now," he said, "the truth, or I'll force it out of both of you with this." He drew, from under his long Chinese coat, a revolver. At the first sight of the weapon, the servant uttered a howl and took refuge in the house. The innkeeper was about to follow his excellent example, when he was prevented by Follingsbee's curt order to "stand." The command being accompanied by an ominous click of the revolver, the innkeeper experienced no difficulty in obeying.

"One never needs one's wits so much as when one has to do with a fool," he muttered.

"Where were you sending your servant? The truth—speak," said Follingsbee.

"And why not? What! are we not all brothers? Away with subterfuge. He was going to the

Yamen where I sent the camel after you on the night of your honourable arrival."

"To the Yamen!" exclaimed Follingsbee aghast.

Then, seeing the innkeeper grin maliciously, he deliberately placed the mouth of the revolver against the fellow's yellow temple. "You spoke part truth. The servant was indeed going to the Yamen and to announce my return here. But the camel you stole. Produce her without delay or I'll send you to join your ancestors—if indeed such a scurvy thief as you has ancestors."

If he had ancestors! The insult was difficult to swallow, but the innkeeper gulped hard and succeeded. "Excellent gentleman," he whined, "curb your anger, remove your fire-weapon, and I will speak. The same evening upon which you left my humble inn, to repair to the Yamen, the lictors ran through the streets shouting that a false courier from Peking had arrived and that the death penalty awaited the person who dare harbour him. I feared for myself, for I became convinced your honourable self was the same courier, and if the magistrate found out you had put up in my house and I had let you escape, even through ignorance, he would not spare me. So I took the camel late that night outside the wall and left it. You will find it there without doubt, for no one would be so dishonest as to steal the beast."

That this explanation was again only half truth, Follingsbee knew. By further threats, he finally extracted from the innkeeper an admission that he

had sold the camel to a guest going south. After obtaining a description of the purchaser, who the innkeeper swore was a one-legged man, Follingsbee soundly trounced him for his dishonesty and hastened off. He felt that it would be impossible to return to Peking without Lla, that he was in honour bound to make every effort to recover the Mongol's valuable Bactrian. He directed his steps to the river-bank. He intended to tell Fen-Sha he would not accompany him to the capital. He found him squatting on the ground peeling watermelon seeds with his long nails, and eating them with apparent relish. Beside him stood Lla, the racing camel!

"Where did you find her? How did you get her?" shouted Follingsbee in delighted surprise.

Fen-Sha carefully gathered up a few seeds he had dropped and put them in his pocket.

"Who?" he asked laconically.

"My camel, standing beside you. I went to the inn where I had left her and the rascally innkeeper told me—under compulsion, I confess—that he had sold her to a one-legged man last night."

"And so he did—for once in his life he spoke the truth; I was the one-legged man. Why didn't you tell me it was the camel you were after? I could have spared you time and trouble. Come, the hour is up—we must start." They mounted the camel and rode off.

Their ride lacked the element of excitement which had characterized Follingsbee's wild run to

Tientsin. Fen-Sha deemed it not only wiser to avoid racing over the country and again exciting the curiosity of the people they encountered, but he even changed the direct route for one longer and less travelled. The next day at noon they stopped to rest in the shade of trees guarding the tomb of a wealthy mandarin. Fen-Sha prepared the refreshments, which consisted of tea, yam-cakes, and pickled chives. Follingsbee watched him in luxurious idleness, stretched full length on the ground. He had not yet regained his customary vigour. The tea being made, they were about to drink, when a filthy, half-clad figure appeared before them, holding in his hands the insignia of the beggar—a wooden clap-bowl.

"Excellencies, a little tea to moisten my parched mouth," he whined. The Chinese beggar is a peculiarly repugnant spectacle. Follingsbee put his cup down in disgust, and seizing the teapot, poured part of its contents into the clap-bowl stretched out to him.

"Begone now, don't linger to windward of us," he ordered as the beggar prepared to squat near them. "You are an affront to the nose."

"Your Excellencies are travelling to Peking?" asked the beggar without moving, and without waiting for an answer—indeed Follingsbee was too astounded at the fellow's insolent assurance to speak for a moment—he added: "It is foolishness to enter Peking in company with a Bactrian camel."

Follingsbee's choler cooled as suddenly as it had risen. "Speak plainly what you mean," he said, attempting to disguise the uneasiness the beggar's words caused him. Fen-Sha appeared to take no interest in the scene; he continued to sip his tea, making the gurgling sound of the very old when drinking.

"I mean," replied the beggar coolly, "that, if you and his Excellency there—who it seems has grown amazingly old since the night you broke that cursed collar from my neck—desire to live a few years longer, it were best to leave that beast there behind you, before you come in sight of Peking." Long before the beggar had finished speaking both Fen-Sha and Follingsbee had jumped swiftly to their feet, moved by the same impulse to secure this dangerous fellow who had seen through Fen-Sha's disguise. It was only when he mentioned the cangue that they dropped their arms and stood staring stupidly down upon him. He, in the meanwhile, had not troubled to shift his position by so much as an inch. Fen-Sha was the first to recover himself. He burst out laughing. "So!" he cried, "you're the gentleman of the wooden necklace! You have followed us here. Why?"

"I didn't follow you. How would that be possible? You have a swift camel, and I only a pair of miserable legs. But, as I was resting in the shade of yonder stone tortoise, I saw you dismount and make ready to refresh yourselves, and, as you approached, I recognized his Lordship here. After

that it was easy to arrive at conclusions; the brains of a yearling camel could do as much. As you did me a great service in freeing me from that devil's collar, I was willing to serve you also. That is all."

"No, that is not all. Why did you tell us not to enter Peking with our camel?" asked Fen-Sha.

"Why? Because every Bannerman in the city has orders to keep watch for a grey Bactrian racing camel and to arrest the rider."

"How did you obtain this information?"

"Two hours since I met one of our band just from Peking—he told me."

"What band?" asked Follingsbee, curious to know what organization would admit among its members a vile beggar.

"Have you heard of the Ki-mao-fan?" inquired the beggar.

Follingsbee shook his head, but Fen-Sha exclaimed, "House of the Hens' Feathers! Then you are of the company of organized beggars?"

The man nodded. "Yes," he said, a certain impudent pride in his voice and manner.

To Follingsbee's amazement, Fen-Sha squatted down beside the fellow with every appearance of being delighted with his company. "Are you on your way to Peking?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the beggar.

"We will help you to arrive without undue fatigue. You shall share our camel; she is quite capable of carrying the three of us without interfering with the swiftness of her gait."

"Look here—I object," said Follingsbee angrily. He spoke in English.

"It is necessary," replied Fen-Sha in the same language and in a low voice. "You will come with us?" he asked, turning to the beggar. He waited anxiously for his answer. "I will come," he said.

Fen-Sha gave a sigh of relief and jumped up. "Then, let's be off."

But Follingsbee was not disposed to accept this arrangement quietly. To travel an entire day or longer in close proximity with a rank smelling, filthy beggar (and no one who has not been close to a Chinese beggar can realize just how rank smelling he can be) was not to be tolerated for a minute. His angry protest was checked almost before it was uttered by the surprise which Fen-Sha's next words inspired.

"We have done you a good turn and you have not failed to requite us, but I am going to ask you to do more and bespeak us a word to your King and then lead us to him."

"Is it because you want the services of the Organization?" he asked.

"Yes," said Fen-Sha.

"For what purpose?"

"To find out if a young Manchu lady recently admitted to the Summer Palace is still there and if not where she is?"

The beggar nodded again. "Tonight you will be in Peking with me, then you shall know. We

will ride the camel as far as Lao-to and leave her there in charge of the Tao-tai of the place. From there we will take a cart to Peking."

Follingsbee felt the situation had grown both beyond his control and comprehension; he opened his mouth now only to gape in silent wonder.

All three men mounted the camel. Lla appeared not to feel the additional weight, but with long swinging strides set off over the country.

In the course of four hours they reached Lao-to, a large, straggling village. The beggar slipped from the camel on the outskirts of this village and told Fen-Sha to follow him. Follingsbee was to await their return. They were not long absent. A well-dressed, middle-aged man, and his servant, appeared with them. "Is this the camel your Excellency desires to leave in my charge until you send for her? Very good—that is easy to arrange. Here is my card, whoever presents it will be given the animal. The cart is being made ready." With that he raised his hands in salutation and, followed by the *mafoo* leading the camel, walked off. Follingsbee had taken possession of the large red visiting card. He now watched the camel disappear with a distinct feeling of uneasiness. How could they be sure that the Tao-tai was honest and would deliver up Lla on the presentation of the card? Fen-Sha divined his thoughts. "It's all right," he assured him, "the animal is under the protection of the Organization—no one would dare take it now. The Tao-tai will keep his word

—he knows the Organization and has no wish to rouse its anger.”

The beggar, sitting on the roadside, his clap-bowl tucked under the rags which only partially covered his filthy person, nodded a calm assent.

Follingsbee felt his head whirling as he looked at this horrible specimen of humanity and tried to realize that it was he under whose guidance and protection they had voluntarily placed themselves and that it was he who gave commands to village headmen.

By and by the cart appeared. Follingsbee seated himself on the shafts opposite the driver, Fen-Sha and the beggar crawled inside. They had calculated their arrival in Peking to a nicety, for, scarcely had the cart passed through the great gates, than they closed behind them, and the capital of the Flowery Kingdom was again isolated from the outside world.

The driver asked no questions; he directed his mule along the inside wall for a certain distance, then turned and entered one of the densely crowded thoroughfares of the Chinese city and drew up before a tea-house. Follingsbee jumped from the shafts. It was then that he discovered that Fen-Sha and the beggar were no longer in the cart.

“What the devil does it all mean?” he muttered.

The driver did not stop to be paid; he whipped up his mule and disappeared among a hundred other blue-topped carts.

CHAPTER XXII

HOUSE OF THE HENS' FEATHERS

FOLLINGSBEE yelled after the driver, then shrugged his shoulders, recognizing the futility of such a procedure. He looked up and down the street, where the populace was still occupied with the great business of buying, bargaining, and selling.

A man brushed up against him; he felt something thrust into his hands; it was a crumpled piece of paper; he smoothed it out and read in English, "Follow the lame beggar and wait outside the door." The note was signed with the initial "F."

|| He seated himself by one of the small tea-tables of an outdoor restaurant. Near him a young dandy was sipping hot saki. Follingsbee ordered a dish of poached eggs in chicken gravy and waited for the lame beggar. Acrobats and conjurors were plying their trade for the amusement of the rich patrons of the restaurant; pedlars were bawling their wares. The crowds in the street increased, till it seemed impossible for carts, chairs, palanquins, or pedestrians to move, nor

did they move beyond a snail's pace. The young dandy near Follingsbee's table grew boisterous over his cup of hot saki—it was not the first he had enjoyed that evening—and he added his coarse jokes and oaths to the general uproar of the street.

Follingsbee had been sitting an hour watching the scene around him, almost forgetting why he was there, when the loud laughter of the tipsy dandy and obsequious waiters, mingling with the groans of someone who had stumbled or been knocked down in the crowd close to them, attracted his attention. He saw a beggar sprawling on the ground and in imminent peril of being trampled to death. With a supreme effort the beggar managed to squirm along till he clutched hold of the leg of Follingsbee's chair and pulled himself up to safety. Then, with a curse thrown at his laughing tormentors, he picked up his stick and hobbled off. Follingsbee rose precipitately and followed him. He had no difficulty in keeping track of the fellow, for, though he threaded his way with astonishing agility through the crowd, he stopped every now and again and raised his raucous voice to beseech alms of the charitably inclined. From one crowded street they passed to another and another, the beggar always leading, Follingsbee always following, though neither exchanged a word or appeared to notice the presence of the other. Follingsbee found himself winding through a labyrinth of unfamiliar alleys, traversing

streets the existence of which he had never divined. Finally, the beggar stopped before a long, low, one-storied house and knocked loudly on his clap-bowl, then upon the door. A brutal-visaged man opened the door; the beggar handed him a small cash and entered. The door was instantly closed behind him and Follingsbee was left standing alone outside and in front of it. He waited, expecting someone to appear and direct his next steps. But no one came. Apparently he was left to shift for himself; he grew impatient, then angry. What did Fen-Sha mean by leaving him without warning and sending a lame beggar to lead him a wild goose chase through the city?

A beggar in tattered trousers and nude to the waist, showing every rib in his shrunken body, came stealthily around the corner. He eyed Follingsbee with something of malignant surprise, then knocking on his clap bowl passed through the door, which was opened to admit him. A few minutes later another beggar came swinging himself along on his stump of a body with the aid of his flat monstrous hands. He moved with incredible swiftness and quite noiselessly. He, too, disappeared behind the door of the house. And now Follingsbee perceived grotesque shapes crawling out from every alley, every blind passageway leading into the street.

He waited, bewildered, motionless, expectant of something he knew not what, but surely not this that he was seeing! He flattened himself against

the embrasure of a closed shop and watched, hidden in the protecting shadow.

The shapes resolved themselves into what must be called human beings, for lack of any other word by which to designate them, but human beings so mutilated, so evil looking, the gargoyles on medieval churches of Western Europe were less hideous to the eye. Cripples, hopping like gaunt birds of prey on one leg, were leading blind creatures with bits of rags attached to their unclean bodies like dead flies to fly-paper; shrivelled women, with faces which long since had lost all trace of the feminine, dragged naked, pot-bellied children after them; old men, middle-aged men; young men and boys, with every conceivable deformity and disease, swarmed silently past him into the house. By and by the steady stream of horrid mendicants ceased.

Follingsbee was about to emerge from his hiding-place, when the sound of quick running caught his ear. He looked out in time to see two men enter the house. One of the men was the beggar who had been their travelling companion that day. The other was Fen-Sha. For a brief space, sheer surprise kept him rooted to the spot. Then he dashed after them and knocked loudly on the closed door. It was opened on a crack, an evil-looking man peered out at him. Follingsbee thrust a copper cash in his hand and pushing past him entered the house. For a moment he felt the impossibility of breathing in the foul atmosphere which struck him like a blow in the face.

The spectacle which confronted him made him ask himself whether he was awake or sleeping through a dreadful nightmare. He was in an immense hall. A gigantic canopy of felt cloth, dotted at intervals with round holes, large enough to admit a man's head, stretched over the entire hall suspended from the ceiling by a system of pulleys.

On the floor of the hall was a thick carpet of feathers, filthy beyond conception. Over this strange carpet, swarming like pestiferous insects, were all the beggars he had seen entering the house and more that he had not seen. It was an orgie of ugliness. Every deformity was represented, every kind of hideous face and evil expression, every stage of starvation and disease, except the final stage, the one solitary blessing that with certainty awaited them all. The air was as the exhalation of a furnace fed with impurities. A horrible din prevailed; from every mouth issued a groan or curse, a coarse jest, a vicious laugh.

In this gathering, Follingsbee stood appalled, horror-stricken. The ribald voice of a woman near him drew the attention of the curious assembly to his presence. The woman spoke again; her words were greeted with an uproarious burst of laughter by the beggars near her. Those farther off raised themselves from their nests to determine the cause of the merriment and saw Follingsbee. Then, through the foul sea of feathers, the beggars waded towards him; they surrounded him on all sides, yelling, howling, jeering. They pushed him

with their stumps of bodies, their leprous arms, their skeleton legs. They tore his clothes and searched madly for his money, for anything of value he might have secreted about his person. A diabolical gaiety reigned. Follingsbee knew that his life was not worth one of the filthy rags on his tormentors. He fought desperately at first, then was seized with such horror at the feel of those fleshless bodies, those armless, legless stumps of men, those shrivelled women, he became paralyzed, incapable of voluntary motion. Suddenly, above the uproar around him, sounded a trumpet-voice, commanding, menacing. The beggars dropped like leeches one by one from him and crawled back into their nests, stepping over each other in their haste to be gone.

Follingsbee staggered against the wall, gasping. A hand supported him and Fen-Sha spoke in his ear. "Why did you not wait outside, as I told you? A minute more and they would have done for you?"

"I thought they had already done for me," returned Follingsbee, trying to control the quiver in his voice and failing. "What is this damned place anyway," he asked.

"The House of the Hens' Feathers; the hotel of the Peking beggars; the unemployed thief; the idle ragamuffin; the meeting place of the Organization; the Throne Room of the King of the Beggars, who, by the way, saved your life just now."

"Wish he had saved it a little earlier in the game. Let's get out of here. A sewer smells sweeter."

"You have seen tonight a sight not to be met with anywhere else in the world," continued Fen-Sha.

"Thank God for that!" said Follingsbee fervently. And he meant it. It seemed to him this was hell worse than any pictured by Dante or drawn by Doré.

"Let's get out of here," he repeated.

"I must stay," replied Fen-Sha, "but there is no reason why you should remain."

Follingsbee pulled himself together. "If you stay, so will I," he declared. In vain Fen-Sha urged him not to linger in the place; he was as eager now to remain as he had been to leave.

"As you will," said Fen-Sha. "The King of the Beggars will harangue his people as soon as the hall is filled."

"Filled!" exclaimed Follingsbee. "Good Lord! what do you call it now?" And for the moment he was again overpowered by the horror of the scene.

"What made you come here?" he asked; "surely you could have found a hiding-place as safe in Peking and more decent—less rank than this"; he waved his hand disgustedly.

"It was not for myself I came," answered Fen-Sha quietly.

"For whom, then?"

"For A-lu-te."

"A-lu-te!" cried Follingsbee; "is she here?"

"I wish with all my heart she were," said Fen-Sha. "Under the protection of the King of the Beggars, she would be safer here by far, than where she now is."

"Where is she?" asked Follingsbee. He could not conceive of a place more horrible for the gentle nurtured, delicate young Manchu girl to be in than the House of the Hens' Feathers.

"She escaped from the Summer Palace and, dressed as a peasant boy, reached in safety the village of Yang-lin, six *lis* from Peking. She took refuge for the night in an inn there, where Li Lien Ying, the Chief Eunuch,—curse his snake's hide,—or one of his henchmen found her and carried her off to a house he owns in the village. She is there, held a prisoner by him; whether she is now alive or dead is not known."

"How did you learn all this?"

"Through the King of the Beggars. He questioned his ragged subjects. Few things occur in Peking, or in the environments, which are not known to the members of the Organization. They hear the gossip of the street, they listen around tea-houses, in opium dens, in gambling houses, around shops and private dwellings and outside of Yamens and on the highroads beyond the city walls, and in the outlying villages. Amongst them, they gather all the news and all the secrets that are whispered about. He, whose authority they recognize, can obtain from them all the information they possess and much of it is valuable, not only

to private individuals, but even to the State. It was through them the King obtained the information of A-lu-te's whereabouts."

"Then why are we staying here? There is no time to lose—we should be even now on our way to Yang-lin to rescue A-lu-te."

"You and I can do nothing," returned Fen-Sha.

Follingsbee looked at him indignantly. "Do you intend to leave her in the hands of that brute without making an attempt to save her?" he asked.

"I have done all in my power, for the present," he answered quietly.

Follingsbee was frankly contemptuous as well as bitterly disappointed in his friend. He had not supposed him capable of such cowardly inaction and told him so.

"Inaction!" said Fen-Sha. "I don't know about that. It remains first to be seen what these people can do for her."

"These beggars! Have you then lost your wits entirely?" he asked, and regretted the words as soon as they were spoken. He believed the young reformer's suffering and long-endured suspense had in truth affected his mind. Perhaps Fen-Sha divined his thoughts, for he said with a curious little smile, "Wait—in a few minutes you will understand. The King is ordering the doors locked—he is going to address his people."

Follingsbee was not without keen curiosity to see this man who called himself King of the Beggars

and was acknowledged as such, not only by the horde of mendicants, but, as he afterwards learnt, by the State itself.

He saw, at the farther end of the great hall, a man swing himself to a seat made of a small plank fastened to the wall some four feet above the floor.

A clap-bowl was on his head by way of a crown; his rags were no worse and no less than those of his subjects; but his face showed a mixture of crafty intelligence and insolent pride not seen in theirs. On closer inspection Follingsbee saw that he was eyeless; the sockets where his eyes should have been were two empty black holes; he was terrible to look upon and more horrible than the wretches who acknowledged his sway. Near him stood the beggar who had accompanied Fen-Sha and Follingsbee to Peking.

"That's his son," whispered Fen-Sha. "When you rescued him from the cangue that night, you gained for us the friendship of the King—it is to that fact you owe your life tonight, and I the information about A-lu-te and it may be something more."

"What?" asked Follingsbee, curiously.

"Hush! He is speaking."

The loud gabble of voices around them ceased suddenly. The beggars sat up in their various nests and listened to their King. He addressed them in a language even Fen-Sha, who could speak most of the dialects of the North and South, could not understand. His speech was long and

seemed to create the utmost excitement in his audience. He was interrupted every now and again with fierce shouts and loud applause; the beggars shook their fists, or mutilated stumps where their fists should have been; crutches were waved and sticks; bandaged heads were wagged and bandaged legs stamped through the feathers on the floor, making the foul air fouler from the cloud of dust and dirt that rose.

The King appeared satisfied with the effect of his harangue. He let himself down from his perch and a few minutes later was wading through the feathers, stepping over and frequently on the forms of his subjects squirming like caterpillars on the floor, till he reached Fen-Sha and Follingsbee. "Is it well?" asked Fen-Sha eagerly as he stopped before them.

"It is well," replied the King. "At the hour of the ox when the city gates are opened, all my people, men and women, the old, the young, the lame, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the sick, the well—for of these last there are a few," he added cynically—"will sally forth to invade Yang-lin. Now answer me, you who saved my son—are you content with the keeping of my promise?"

"Can I tell yet? I will wait and see, for I go with you when you set out for Yang-lin," replied Fen-Sha.

"Then, have a care that you do not interfere in what does not concern you—my protection would avail you nothing in that case, even if I chose to

extend it, which is doubtful. The hour is theirs—I have given it to them—if the people of Yang-lin come not to terms.”

With that he turned and left them.

Fen-Sha seized Follingsbee by the hand. “Come, we will leave the House of the Hens' Feathers now; my mission here is over.”

It was with a deep sigh of relief that Follingsbee turned his back on the mass of degraded creatures, settling themselves down into their nests of feathers. The huge felt canopy, their bed covering, was being slowly lowered. The two young men hurried out to avoid contact with it. On the street they drew deep breaths of the fresh night air—Follingsbee had a conviction that nothing short of an internal scrubbing with disinfectants would cleanse his lungs again.

Fen-Sha told him of the beggars' plan. They intended going on one of their periodical raids in the country—a privilege accorded them for centuries past—and, by their locustlike depredations, so pester and frighten the inhabitants of Yang-lin that the headman of the place would appear before their King and arrange terms by which the village would be freed from their devastating presence.

In this case they would demand neither money, food, or clothing, but the delivery of A-lu-te into their hands. They would claim her, not as a hostage or victim, for such was not their custom, but as one entitled to the protection of the frater-

nity. They would promise that if, when the girl was brought before them, she chose not to accompany them, preferring instead to remain in durance, they would retire without protest and quietly. This was their plan of campaign; whether it would prove successful or not remained to be seen.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BEGGARS' RAID

THE two young men repaired to Follingsbee's rooms to await the hour of the opening of the city gates. As the time drew near they slipped out and made their way to the Shih Che Men—the North-West Gate. The streets were deserted, or rather they appeared to be, for, when the huge gates were thrown wide to permit the outside world entrance to the capital, the streets suddenly became alive with a grotesque horde of creatures, rickety, decrepit, stunted, who ran, limped, crawled, and hopped, or glided like reptiles, toward the gates. They came from every direction. The guards slunk back and made no effort to interfere,—they knew better than that, possessing, as they did, a liking for a whole skin and a preference for a natural death.

The Shih Che Men closed again. Along the outside walls on either side flowed two similar streams to join the one which had just issued from the North-West Gate. These three streams mingled in one great whole, forming a river which overflowed the highway and bore Follingsbee and

Fen-Sha along in its current. Swiftly, silently, sullenly, it moved, carrying with it everything encountered on its course. Fortunately for the public the hour was not one in which people went abroad; the few who were out, seeing the horrible river bearing down upon them, sought refuge in the fields or off the highroad anywhere to safety.

The inhabitants of the village Yang-lin, like most country folk, were matutinal. They had eaten their early rice; their shops were open and the workers were going about the business of the day. An itinerant mender of broken jars was the first to see the approaching danger. He had spent the night in a house at the end of the village, and was starting on his rounds for the day singing in high, falsetto voice to attract customers: "Bowls mended, jars and pots repaired, every hole drilled carefully; plates made new again."

The cry died on his lips as the sullen roar of the fast-flowing stream reached him. He cast one frightened glance behind him, then fled down the village street shouting with all the strength of his lungs, which were sound ones, "The beggars have come! The beggars have come!"

Fast as he ran, the stream flowed faster.

The people who were abroad were caught in the horrible current which soon filled every nook and corner of the street. The truckling fear of those who were caught excited the malicious glee of the beggars. This was their day. They whined their mendicant cry of, "Alms, alms for the poor—alms

for the starving," with a note that threatened perceptible in the whine. No one thought of resistance. Strings of cash appeared from the pockets of the well-to-do and were transferred to the rags of the beggars, to be later handed over to their King for distribution, every subject receiving his share of the spoils. The villagers who had no cash about them were shorn of their hats, and their coats were made to adorn the shoulders of some skeleton scarecrow. A few men tried to slink off home, to wait behind closed windows and barred doors till the beggars had gone. They were quickly held in their places by naked skinny arms, or tripped up by bony legs, and sprawling on the ground made to stay where they had fallen.

Women screamed, children whimpered, too frightened to cry aloud, and hid their little heads in the folds of their parents' gowns. Indeed, the spectacle offered to their childish eyes was so terrible, even their elders had no words of comfort or assurance to give them.

The beggars were armed with sticks, crutches, broken knives, stones, with everything in fact wherewith a beggar could arm himself. A few had hatchets and pitchforks stolen that morning from workmen encountered on the road.

In the midst of the uproar the trumpet voice of the King was heard, shouting for silence. The effect was instantaneous, complete quiet prevailed. Only one old woman shrieked again. A filthy hand was clapped upon her mouth. "You gap-

toothed old beldame, didn't you hear the order to be silent?"

"Perhaps she's deaf and can only feel," said another and beat her over the head with his crutch.

The King was lifted on the shoulders of his subjects. He sat on his human throne with a savage, insolent mien, a monstrous spectacle, an evil thing perched in the air. His black empty sockets looked like burnt-out craters and gave to his face more than ever that day a demoniacal expression. "People of Yang-lin," he shouted, "we are the yeast that ferments hell in your village. If ye would escape my army which spares nothing, which takes everything, from the bead-string off the soft neck of your infants, to the clothes on the back of your women, and the last cash in the strong-box of your shops, then listen to my terms."

"The terms! the terms! Let us hear them. We promise to agree!" cried the villagers in the streets.

"Fools!" returned the King scornfully. "Do you think I deal with such as you? What are your promises worth? Call a meeting of the headmen of the village instantly." Again they agreed. The King deputed a guard to accompany the villagers sent to summon the headmen.

The Inn of Peace and Security was decided upon as the place where the conference should be held. We have already made acquaintance with this inn; it was here where the Tartar wife of the Chinese innkeeper had given shelter to A-lu-te

and where Ho-Shu found her hiding, flattened like a yam-cake under a piece of matting.

The village headmen answered the King's summons reluctantly, but determined to make the best possible bargain with him. If the sum of money demanded of them proved too outrageously large, they would dispute the matter long and fiercely, though they well knew that in the end the beggars would not be denied. Their surprise was great when they learnt from the King the nature of his terms, which included neither money, food, nor clothing, but the giving into his hands of a young Manchu woman, who, as they all knew, was caught and imprisoned in their village by order of the powerful Chief Eunuch, Li Lien Ying.

They were aghast and knew not what to do; they were between two fires. They feared to rouse against their village the terrible wrath of the great eunuch and they feared the vengeance of the beggars if their demands were refused. In this dilemma they made an offer to the King of a large sum of money, a sum they knew to be greater than any he had ever obtained from villages in that neighbourhood.

It was a tempting bait, but failed of its purpose. The big, black sockets in the face of the King looked bigger and blacker than ever; one of the headmen declared later that he saw fire smouldering in the gloomy depths of these ugly holes and expected every minute to see flames spring forth to burn up every man jack of them.

The King smote the table with his horny hands and roared, "I have told you my terms—agree to them or not as you wish, but remember this, if you fail to deliver up the woman to me, my army will encamp here; I will make the village of Yang-lin my headquarters for three months to come."

The headmen conferred together. A more dreadful threat they could not conceive of; it were almost better to leave their homes at once, leave them in the hands of the beggars, together with all their possessions, and begin life over again elsewhere. For what would their existence be worth with such an army encamped at their door? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! And, after all, what right had the palace eunuch to make use of their village as a prison for an escaped concubine? If the beggars wanted the woman, and if she were willing—incredible as it seemed—to go with them, why, then, in Buddha's name, let them have her.

This decision having been reached, the headmen conducted the King and his army to a house on the outskirts of the village facing the hills. This house was owned by the Chief Eunuch. No one in the village had ever crossed its threshold. Many stories were told in whispers—for the villagers' fear of the eunuch was great—of the orgies which took place periodically behind those walls, and of dark deeds, tortures, and crimes unspeakable. The village maids and young women

had such fear of the house and its near neighbourhood that they never passed it unless accompanied by brothers, fathers, or husbands and even then they trembled with apprehension of some dreadful danger which might befall them.

Now, when it became known that the beggars' demand was not money, but the deliverance of an imperial concubine held prisoner in the house of the Chief Eunuch, the villagers were filled with amazement, also they were vastly relieved, not sharing their headmen's dark forebodings. Men and boys, women, girls, and children, prompted by curiosity to penetrate the mystery of this house, followed in the procession.

Fen-Sha and Follingsbee had remained unobtrusively in the background, but kept themselves informed of the progress of the negotiations in the Inn of Peace and Security, and, when the strange army began to move upon the Chief Eunuch's house, in the western outskirts of the village, they made their way to the front, keeping close to the King and his guides.

The house was surrounded by high brick walls. The gates were closed and barred. The village headmen advanced and knocked loudly upon the wooden panels. A slide was opened and a *tingi* (gate-keeper), with official hat upon his head, peered out.

"What do you want?" he inquired gruffly. But when he saw the horde of beggars behind the headmen, he slammed the slide shut, nor would

repeated knockings and loud commands induce him to open it again.

"You perceive we are powerless; we can do nothing. He won't admit us if we knock here all day," said the headmen addressing the King.

"Well, stand there and knock till I tell you to stop," replied the King, coolly.

They thought it best to obey and fell to pounding on the gates again with great vigour.

But, in the meanwhile, the King motioned to his army. The beggars appeared to understand. Without a word they approached the wall; the first comers crouched down; those behind them got on the backs thus offered and scrambled like monkeys to the top of the wall, from which point they aided their less agile companions to mount.

Before many minutes had passed and while the *tingi* was yet cynically listening to the loud banging on the gate, the wall above his head was swarming with a ragged mass of human beings. Suddenly he looked up. He gave a shout of alarm. Servants ran from the house into the court, then ran back again to procure weapons with which to drive the strange invaders from the walls.

They were not quick enough. The beggars dropped like a swarm of locusts into the court, and driving the frightened *tingi* from his post, threw open the gates.

The remainder of the ragged battalion, headed by the King, rushed in. The frightened villagers did not follow. By this time the servants had col-

lected their wits and their weapons; they prepared to attack the invaders. They were greeted with fearful yells, curses, and grimaces. Before they could do more than strike down those nearest them, they were fairly crawled over and upon, as if by a horde of insects. The beggars twined themselves about their opponents' bodies, biting with cracked and yellow teeth, pinching with black, scarred, and horrid fingers; they were like scorpions, centipedes, poisonous spiders. The servants fought valiantly to free themselves and called upon the villagers crowded near the gates to come to their assistance. Not a man of Yang-lin moved. The house, the owner, and his servants bore an evil name; besides it were better in their opinion that the beggars should vent their spiteful rage here than in the village.

Fen-Sha and Follingsbee had been among the first to scale the wall and drop into the court; they left the beggars to their fighting and succeeded in entering the house. They found themselves in a magnificent apartment—not even the Empress Dowager in her Summer Palace could boast of possessing one more beautiful. It was spacious and lofty; arches of rare wood, exquisitely carved, so delicate, so open, they seemed like lace, were lined with apricot silk; for here Cobbler's Wax Li had arrogated to himself the right to use the imperial colour. On the walls hung wonderfully embroidered panels and rare paintings, soft rugs, in subdued rich shades, covered the tiled

floor, and everywhere were antique bronzes, cloisonné vases and urns in which seemed to grow flowering jade pomegranate and orange trees and shrubs of fantastic shape, yet which were not displeasing to the eye. Not a soul was in the apartment. As Fen-Sha and Follingsbee stood for a moment irresolute, they saw a curtain at the farther end of the room moved slightly by some hand upon the other side. Simultaneously they rushed towards it and jerked the curtain open. A half dozen young women, painted red and white and gorgeously attired, screamed and fled like butterflies the length of the room. The two men went in hot pursuit to intercept their flight, at the same time beseeching them not to be alarmed as no harm was intended them. The young men were relieved to find their assurance calmed the little ladies, for they stopped, turned, and faced their pursuers. They looked at them demurely, then coquettishly and began to titter. Fen-Sha scanned their faces eagerly; A-lu-te's was not among their number.

"What do our Lords require of us?" asked the prettiest in the bunch, casting down her eyes, and glancing swiftly up again in a manner meant to be provocative.

"Who are you?" asked Fen-Sha.

They tittered and did not answer. Fen-Sha frowned.

"I am in no mood to joke and play with you. Answer my questions and you will not be harmed,

refuse and I call in the beggars out there in the court." His tone admitted of no doubt as to the seriousness of the threat.

The painted dolls ceased tittering, ceased ogling; they looked alarmed.

"My Lord," said the prettiest one again, "I will answer as best I can. We belong to the household of the great Chamberlain, Li Lien Ying, who comes here for rest and recreation from his arduous duties of state."

She tried to impart, both in speech and manner, an impression of honour and dignity to the position they occupied in the place. But Fen-Sha's look of scorn, and the pity and contempt pictured on the face of Follingsbee, had the effect of humiliating and angering her. "And," she continued shrilly, "you must leave here instantly, taking with you the monkey-face horde you came with. I saw you on the wall with the creatures commanding, directing them. The Lord of Nine Thousand Years shall be informed and do not doubt but that he will avenge the insult of your presence in his house. Even now he is on his way here. May he have your bones splintered, your flesh made jelly!"

Fen-Sha ignored her agreeable wishes. "Are there any other women in the house?" he asked sharply.

The painted, doll-like faces looked at each other and maintained silence.

"Answer," said Fen-Sha, striding towards them.

They retreated hurriedly, still silent. He seized one of them—she who had spoken—by the arm and dragged her towards the first apartment. "It may be the beggars can make you speak," he said grimly.

She eluded his grasp and fell on her knees, trembling now with fear. "Do not hand me over to them, my Lord. I will answer all your questions, I will tell you everything I know."

"See to it that you speak the truth then," replied Fen-Sha in a harsh voice. "Was a young Manchu lady brought into this house two nights ago?"

"No, my Lord."

"You lie—I go to summon the beggars," and he made two strides towards the door.

She called in terror after him, "Wait, wait, my Lord; I did lie, for, though it appeared to be a youth whom Ho-Shu, the eunuch, brought here the other night, tied hand and feet, yet we know her to be a woman. We were peering out when he came and we saw her face—it was the face of a woman."

"Where is she? Quick—answer! If you lie again I'll show no mercy, nor the beggars neither."

"My Lord, I cannot tell you where she is, for I do not know. When Ho-Shu carried her—she was as one dead—we watched him pass into the garden and disappear. We dared not follow, but, by and by, he came back—alone. He said the Lord of Nine Thousand Years would be here today, and if we pried where we had no business to pry in the

garden, he would find it out and punish us severely. Oh, my Lord, my Lord, let him not know that I have told you—he would kill me in his wrath.”

“Have no fear—if he comes, ’tis I who will do the killing—not he.” There was ferociousness in Fen-Sha’s voice and face. Even the woman, though she felt relieved, recoiled from him frightened, while the five fluttering butterflies, clinging to one another in the far corner, screamed again. But Fen-Sha paid no heed to them, nor to the increasing clamour in the court. He tore open a window and sprang into the garden. Follingsbee had been a silent spectator to this scene, yet had kept his eyes and ears alert, lest the servants, fighting outside, heard the women scream and returned to their assistance. He gave one swift parting glance towards the door, then jumped from the window to follow Fen-Sha.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GAMBLERS

THE Chinese have a proverb which reads, "The dog in the kennel barks at his fleas, but the dog who is hunting does not feel them."

The half-starved, maimed beggars did not feel their infirmities, did not heed the whips and weapons of the servants frantically striving to force them back as they penetrated into the handsome apartments of Li Lien Ying's villa. The women, whom Fen-Sha and Follingsbee had just left, fled shrieking from the room as the beggars entered. No one pursued them. What did they care for women when, for the picking up, they had their choice of splendid treasures? They shouted with wonder, greed, and delight. The servants did not attempt to stop their depredations; they were rushing to the protection of the women and vanished with them in a distant part of the house, where they listened, stupid with fear, to the confused tumult of the beggars. These, intoxicated with their easy victory, and the promised satisfaction of their greed, fell upon the silk embroidered curtains, tore them down and wrapped them

about their rags, or made receptacles of them to hold the gold and silver vases, the miniature trees and flowers of jade, exquisite in design, colour, and carving. They picked out the jewels in the inlaid cabinets and tables with sharpened points of sticks or with their finger nails. They seized the priceless panel paintings which adorned the walls—paintings of great artists in the Tang dynasty when France was still a country of barbarians, and the Druids dwelt yet in the British Isles. They broke into thousands of fragments the beautiful hawthorn ginger-jars, the rose-coloured, translucent egg-shell vases, in their fury to seize them. The rooms echoed with shouts of triumph, yells of rage over disputed possessions, and with wild discordant laughter. Then the dreadful torrent, leaving ruin in its wake, swept out through the courtyard into the highroad, where the villagers, afraid to follow them into the house, had withdrawn to await the next scene in the drama.

They squatted in the dust of the road and soon became absorbed in an occupation even more congenial to them than looting. They gambled, staking their newly acquired possessions against the money of the villagers. The largest group was gathered around the King. This personage was seated on a magnificent cloisonné urn; nothing could be seen of him but his hideous face peering above the urn and his half naked legs hanging over the sides.

Excitement in the group around him was run-

ning high. A village gamester, who had already lost all his money to the King in the gambling bout between them, even the clothes upon his back, stood stripped to the skin while the King fantastically draped the garments he had won about his head like a huge turban and shouted for a man to approach with something to stake. The nude gamester protested angrily that he would play again and that this time he would win.

"Huh!" jeered the beggars, "what have you left to stake?"

"The forefinger of my right hand against all this," replied the fellow coolly, indicating the loot at the King's side.

At this announcement the King's mouth opened wide in a laugh of ferocious merriment. The news spread among the other groups, that a man, having nothing left to gamble, was going to stake his finger against the King's share of loot.

Beggars, and villagers, crowded around the two principal players, pushing, laughing, cursing, intent upon obtaining a near view of this exciting game. In the meanwhile preparations were made for the play. A free circle was formed by crowding back the excited throng and in the centre a small fire was lighted. Beside the fire a broken knife was laid which the King had previously ordered one of his beggar knaves to carefully sharpen upon a stone. Then the dice-throwing began. The spectators in the rear pushed those in front, and craned their necks, and stood on tiptoe in efforts to see.

A few minutes of partial silence reigned. Soon a shout of triumph from the King announced that the villager had lost again. The rabble applauded with roars of laughter. The King crawled like a hideous black beetle from his urn, and, guided by one of his subjects, gripped the hand of the nude gamester. Both men knelt on the ground. The stone upon which the broken knife had been sharpened was pushed towards them. With perfect stoicism, the villager laid his finger on the stone; the King took the knife and, first feeling with ferocious carefulness the exact length of the finger, in order not to lose an iota of his winnings, cut the finger off to its root. Had he possessed eyes, he could not have measured better. He turned the urn upside down, and, mounting it, waved the finger high above his head, that all might see it, making the while horrible grimaces, evincing his joy. The vanquished gamester said not a word; he might have lost a slipper from his foot, for any sign of pain he gave. He took a burning stick from the fire, and coolly held the flames to his bleeding hand till the wound was cauterized. While all were intent upon this scene, a man in the rear of the crowd shouted suddenly, "Cobbler's Wax Li is coming!" This announcement produced an instantaneous effect. All turned to look. Far down the road a little column of dust rose in the air. That sight was sufficient. The villagers, men, women, and children ran swiftly back to their homes. The King kept his position

on the upturned urn long enough to roar commands to his army, then sprang down, and with two men guiding him, fled in the opposite direction, which was Pekingward, followed by the beggars laden with their loot.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE VILLA

WHEN Fen-Sha and Follingsbee jumped from the window, they found themselves—though they did not know it, nor would have cared had they been aware of it—in a garden laid out after the celebrated one of the philosopher, Sse ma Kouang. Winding through the garden, which comprised not more than three or four acres, was a charming little rivulet, that fell from an artificial hill on the west, and splashing down into a deep pool was diverted into four shining streamlets which meandered through tiny meadows and lovely parks. Brilliant aquatic birds swam in the water. The banks were terraced and covered with roses, or pomegranate and oleander trees and persimmons, whose fruit hung in the autumn like brilliant red globes from the branches. Graceful bridges of marble spanned the rivulets at intervals and led to summer houses, miniature pagodas, and fern-grown grottoes. Here and there were little islands with rustic seats in the shade of flowering, sweet-scented mimosa trees. But of all this loveliness Fen-Sha saw nothing and Follingsbee

only vaguely. They ran down winding walks, canopied by weeping willows; they crossed the little bridges to peer into pleasant grottoes and summer houses and pagodas. Of A-lu-te they found not a trace. They came at last upon a barrier of rocks fantastically heaped to represent a camel's back; at the bottom of this barrier and cunningly veiled by a thicket of tufted bamboo and honeysuckle vines, was an opening into which they rushed with an exultant cry. They penetrated a deep grotto, which grew narrower and deeper as they advanced, till finally it terminated in a black sloping pit where they could with difficulty stand upright and where the gloom was impenetrable, the air fetid, and where soft slimy mud covered their feet.

"A-lu-te," called Fen-Sha, as he groped helplessly about in the blackness. "A-lu-te, are you here?" No answer. Follingsbee struck a match. On the ground in a muddy pool of water, tied hands and feet with coarse hempen ropes, was A-lu-te. Here she had lain for long hours, night and day, at first struggling painfully to free herself from the ropes which cut into her soft, delicate flesh, then motionless, almost without breathing, as one whose frail form has been crushed beneath the weight of heavy stones above her, stones which hid her from the outside world, from the flowering garden, where birds sang joyfully in the sunshine, and where the silly little women of Li's household came to play and scold and chatter like bright-

plumed paroquets, with never a thought of her perishing near them. The water trickled from the mouldy stones and formed a bed for her to lie in. The fear of dying alone in the blackness had at first overcome her and she had called again and again to Ho-Shu when he brought her, to come back, even if only to taunt and mock her. She had cried like a child, imploring, coaxing, raging. He had returned and, holding high the lantern, had peered down upon her with leering face to say, "You won't be long alone, my dear. Li Lien Ying will soon be here to make you a little visit."

And the chill which her body felt in the cold atmosphere of that black pit penetrated to her heart. She hoped then she would die before Li came. The hours passed; she lay there, neither waking nor sleeping, in a state of semi-consciousness, when she was roused by a voice. It was a voice which she constantly dreamed of, but never thought to hear again, the voice of one she loved better than life, better than the sunshine, than the sweet fresh air, or the song of the birds; it was the voice of Fen-Sha calling her name. She had tried to answer, struggling to raise her head from the mud, making one supreme effort to put forth strength in her tones. Then she fell back. No voice penetrated her tired brain now, not even the voice of Fen-Sha.

And so he found her, the dainty maiden, whose beauty, gaiety, and sweetness had been the happiness of his stormy, perilous career. He lifted the

poor mud-covered little body in his arms and carried it carefully as a mother carries her sick child, from the grotto into the garden. To Follingsbee's expression of horror, pity, and wrath at the girl's pathetic plight, he made no answer, nor did a word fall from his lips till, out in the sunshine, he said, "Go first, be my sword arm, I entreat you."

"Is it needful to entreat?" replied Follingsbee reproachfully.

They ran, Follingsbee leading.

The clamour of fighting appeared to have ceased. As they hurried through the winding paths, along the rose bordered rivulets, and approached the house, they saw no one. In the magnificent apartment, where they had first encountered the women, were evidences of shameless looting. The place was deserted,—not a beggar, not a servant, was in sight. Follingsbee thought he heard a woman's whimper, but dared not stop to investigate. In the courtyard the same ominous silence met them. In one corner lay what appeared to be a bundle of clothes, but which was in reality the *tingi*, his legs broken by blows from a beggar's cudgel.

Fen-Sha and Follingsbee sped across the large court to the open gate. They had barely reached it, when the sound of quick galloping struck their ears. Cautiously they peered out. Less than a yard away was a group of horsemen in the official uniform of Li Lien Ying's outriders.

"The Chief Eunuch's escort!" gasped Fen-Sha

and, even as he said the words, Follingsbee slammed the great gates shut and barred them.

For a moment the two men stood staring dumbly at each other. What was to be done now? Escape from the villa was cut off; they could only seek a hiding-place somewhere in the house. Already loud shouting for the *tingi* was heard and pounding upon the gates. They turned and ran back into the house. If the servants should hear their master's voice and crawl from their hiding-places, the game was up. Fen-Sha's arm tightened around A-lu-te's slender form; Follingsbee instinctively felt for his revolver only to remember that the beggars had stolen it in the House of the Hens' Feathers, leaving him the cartridges. The pounding on the gates increased in violence, then was followed by clattering of horses' hoofs in the court.

"Quick!" cried Follingsbee, "back into the garden! We may be able to scale the wall!"

"It's twenty feet high and has iron spikes on top," said Fen-Sha without moving. His eyes scanned the apartment. "That small door to the right—see where it leads." Follingsbee pushed the door open and entered a dimly lighted room. Two huge, newly lacquered coffins¹ loomed up sombrely before him. "A death chamber!" he exclaimed turning to come out. Fen-Sha pushed

¹ Every Chinese buys as handsome a coffin as he can afford for himself and generally keeps it in his house as he would a piece of furniture.

past him. "No," he said, "not a death chamber—yet. Close the door again, but do not lock it."

In a chair carried by four brawny bearers and surrounded by mounted attendants, among them the eunuch Ho-Shu, sat Cobbler's Wax Li, splendidly apparelled. He had left the Summer Palace that morning without telling the Empress Dowager of A-lu-te's capture.

The knowledge that his victim was safely imprisoned in the grotto of his garden and without possibility of escape (for Ho-Shu had securely bound her) had made him content to await his opportunity of feasting his eyes upon her, of enjoying her abject fear before she was done to death with the tortures he designed for her.

The morning of A-lu-te's flight from the Palace, when he had cynically watched each step of her fancied escape from the eminence of the round tower and marked the exact spot in the tall Kaoliang where she had disappeared dressed in the clothes of the dead peasant boy outside the gates, he had not lost sight of her one moment. He had given his instructions to Ho-Shu to press her flight towards the village of Yang-lin, near his villa, and there seize her. In the meanwhile he, himself, had informed the Empress Dowager of A-lu-te's flight. The Old Buddha's rage had been terrible; he almost repented of having allowed the girl to escape from the Palace, for it was upon his

head that the Empress Dowager's fury broke. She upbraided and reviled him, she threatened him with dismissal, for hours she refused to allow him to speak to, or approach, her, while she alternately wept and stormed in her pavilion. He became alarmed; had he not been afraid to trust a messenger, he would have sent after Ho-Shu and changed his instructions and had A-lu-te promptly brought back to the Palace.

But he tided the storm, for the Empress Dowager hearing of the efforts he had put forth to find the girl, of the numerous detachments of Banner-men he had sent scouring the hills and plain in every direction (but the right one), had relented sufficiently to send for him and learn from his own lips all that he was doing. After that, it had been an easy matter to again ingratiate himself with her; he even succeeded in gaining merit in her eyes by the zeal he displayed in organizing and directing the search.

Now at last he had come to enjoy his revenge. All the way from the Summer Palace he had gone over and over again the scene he intended enacting when he reached the grotto. He rehearsed in detail all the refinement of tortures he had planned before she was done to death by slow smothering in mud.

He rubbed his big hands together in the grim pleasure evoked by these pictures. As he drew nearer the village of Yang-lin his impatience to arrive increased. From behind the silk curtains

he shouted to the perspiring bearers to hasten; he threatened them with application of the big bamboo upon the soles of their already aching feet, if they did not run faster. He could hear them panting in their increased efforts at speed, as if their lungs would crack.

Finally they stopped before the gates of his villa. Li stepped from his chair without a glance at the bearers who dropped like dead mules on the ground.

The *mafoos* had jumped from their horses and were already pounding for admittance. The *tingi* did not open the gates nor peer out upon them through the panel slides. Li roared and stamped furiously upon the ground, demanding of his frightened attendants the meaning of this unprecedented ignoring of his presence. They knew no more than he and were afraid to remind him of the fact. Within the court profound silence reigned. "Break down the gates!" commanded the Chief Eunuch. "The *tingi*'s head shall be stuck on a pole to ornament the broken gates."

The doors were about to be battered down, when they slowly opened. The Chief Eunuch entered with an oath on his lips and stopped, struck dumb with what he saw. The court was strewn with shreds of filthy rags and portions of the garments worn by the servants of his villa. At his feet lay the *tingi* senseless, a deep gash in his head where he had fallen and with both legs broken. He had managed to crawl on his hands to open the

gates for his master, then had dropped. He appeared to be dead. Farther off were the bodies of three beggars. Here and there in the court, stamped in the dirt, ruined beyond repair, were panel paintings; some of these Li recognized as the most priceless in his cherished collection. He found his voice at last and fairly spat the curses which had been choking him from his mouth. Striding through the court he entered the house. Here the scene was even worse. Everything was in confusion, the furniture was smashed, his valuable jars, bowls, and vases broken and others gone. The Chief Eunuch tore from one room to another in a frenzy of rage, roaring like a madman. He shouted for the servants, for the women of his household. At last he found them, huddled together in the far end of the house, the women whimpering, the servants with their long coats torn, their official hats hanging down their backs, or entirely off, their teeth chattering, and this last because of their fear of him, which exceeded their fear of the invading beggar horde.

With difficulty the Chief Eunuch obtained an account of what had occurred that morning. He listened in cold concentrated wrath. He believed the raid to have been entirely a beggars' raid for loot, unsurpassed in Chinese history for its audacity, and for which the King of the Beggars, responsible to the State for the conduct of his subjects, should be made to pay with his life. It was only when the women took up the tale and told

of two men, not mendicants, who had forced their way to their apartments (in which statement the poor things lied glibly, for they, themselves, had penetrated to the front of the house to watch with fearful curiosity the uproar in the court) and demanded whether a strange Manchu woman was secreted there, that the Chief Eunuch's anger took another turn. He poured forth questions in such rapid succession the women had trouble to keep pace with their answers. Having learnt all they had to tell, he commanded them to remain where they were and left the room with Ho-Shu. The two eunuchs made haste to reach the grotto. They found A-lu-te gone. The hempen cords which had held her securely bound were lying on the ground and everywhere the marks of feet, not hers, showed in the mud about them.

"Fool!" cried the Chief Eunuch, turning upon his henchman because of the necessity he was under to vent his rage upon someone without delay, "Fool, why did you bring her here? Were there no dark chambers in my villa, with locks and bars, where she could have been thrown?"

And he struck Ho-Shu a blow across the mouth. The eunuch spat out the blood and two front teeth, then answered sullenly: "I did as you commanded; you said the cave was filled with slime and reptiles and that here she would suffer more; and I tied her hand and foot, as these ropes can testify. How should I know that anyone would find her?"

"Silence!" roared Li, "or I will wring your cursed neck."

The Chief Eunuch had a powerful frame; there was no question of his ability to do as he threatened.

They returned in silence to the house.

"Go fetch the *tingi*," commanded Li, on being told that the man still lived.

The gatekeeper, being unable to walk, was carried into Li's presence and dropped on the floor before him.

"Did you see two men, who entered with the beggars, leave again?"

"My Lord, I saw them and they have not left the villa."

"Beware lest your tongue speaks lies—how do you know they did not leave with the beggar horde?"

"Because, my Lord, I saw them with these two eyes running towards the gates just as your Lordship was arriving. One of them carried a youth in his arms. At the time your Lordship demanded admittance I was at the extreme end of the court, unable to use my legs, broken as they were by those vile creatures with their cudgels, and I could only crawl slowly on my hands to——"

"Did I ask about you and your miserable legs, fellow? What did the two men?"

"They spoke low to one another, then ran with all speed back into the house."

"Ah! they did that? They ran into the house?" said Li and a smile, slow, cunning, unpleasant to

see, came into his face. "Enough, take the fellow away; let his head be struck off and affixed to a pole over the gates. It will serve to remind the next *tingi* what fate awaits him if he lets down the bars to admit vermin into his master's house."

"Mercy! My Lord, mercy!" cried the *tingi*. "I did not open the gates. By the graves of my ancestors, I did not; I let the creatures storm and shout and never lifted down a bar. I——"

"Remove him," said the Chief Eunuch coldly.

The wretch was dragged out, still crying for mercy.

"And you," continued Li, in short, sharp tones, to his servants, "search every room in the house—allow not a nook, a corner, to escape your eyes. Ten of you go with Ho-Shu into the garden; examine carefully every clump of bushes, every summer house, pagoda, grotto. I make each one among you responsible if these robbers, hiding on my premises, are not brought before me within the hour. See to it!"

The servants fell on their knees, struck their foreheads on the ground, then rose as if pulled by a single string, and rushed off to begin their search.

Li walked up and down the room with long, soft-footed strides. Now and again he stood still listening. He gave the effect of a hyena, sniffing the air.

On one of these occasions he seemed to be seized with a sudden thought, for he flung the door open

into the coffin-room and stood on the threshold peering in. Then he entered. A look of relief and satisfaction came into his face when he saw that the handsome lacquered coffins he had ordered constructed for himself and his favourite woman had not been molested by the beggars. He lighted a cloisonné lantern, a veritable work of art, which hung from the ceiling, and, bending over the coffin nearest him, scrutinized the rich lacquer coating carefully. No! it had not been injured. He examined the second coffin; this, also, was unimpaired. He was about to lift the lid of the coffin to look inside, not because he retained a fear that this magnificent last bed of his had been polluted by the touch of filthy, sacrilegious hands, but to pleasure his eye with a glance at the rich apricot silk with which it was lined; for in this instance he had not trespassed on the royal prerogative,—Tzŭ Hsi had accorded him the privilege of using the imperial colour after death. The door of the outer room burst open and the servants, Ho-Shu in the lead, rushed in. Li turned, seated himself on the unopened coffin lid, and called them to approach.

They crowded into the little room.

"Lord of Nine Thousand Years!" said Ho-Shu, with a curious mingling of fear, spite, and malicious joy in his voice—he had not forgotten the blow on his mouth and the loss of his front teeth. "We have discovered where and how the men escaped."

"So, they have escaped? You know this?" Under the quietness of Li's tones lay something menacing.

"Yes, my Lord," continued Ho-Shu hardily. "We had examined every spot in the garden which could offer even a semblance of a hiding-place. Twice we made the rounds of the garden and twice we skirted the wall, which, as your Lordship knows, is high and well protected against marauders with iron spikes. Though I well knew that it was impossible for any man to escape over the wall, still I determined to look even there, so I had a ladder brought, and mounting it, assured myself that no one could find foothold between the spikes. While I was on the top round of the ladder it broke and gave way; I fell, and in falling my body hit against the wall near the ground. I put my hands out to save myself; great was my astonishment to find the wall yield, as it were, to my touch and open, disclosing a passageway along the side."

At these words, the Chief Eunuch, who had evinced tokens of uneasiness as Ho-Shu's narrative proceeded, sprang from his coffin seat and glared furiously at his henchman. "Did you enter?" he shouted hoarsely. Ho-Shu's face showed a bland cunning. "Assuredly, Lord of Nine Thousand Years, I entered, and not I alone, but those with me, and even the other servants, for I called them all, fearing to enter alone. We followed the passage in the wall and came to an underground room filled with sacks."

Li cast his eyes over his servants. All were now in the secret guarded so jealously for years. His treasure chamber, where he hoarded his vast fortune, was known to every servant in his house, and they were sixty in number. Had Ho-Shu kept the discovery to himself, it had been an easy matter to guard against a disclosure, but the sly eunuch had taken the precaution of summoning the entire household to penetrate with him the secret passage.

The discovery of his hidden treasure cave touched the Chief Eunuch more nearly than the escape of A-lu-te. How many of his precious sacks had they stolen between them? He would go himself and find out and have the entrance walled up until he could have another hiding-place constructed.

Pale and trembling with wrath, he left the room, commanding his servants—winking slyly now at one another—to follow. It was indeed an unlucky day for Cobbler's Wax Li. It was also, had he but known it, an unlucky day for Ho-Shu, for, in spite of his precaution to admit all of Li's household into the secret of the hidden treasure chamber in order to insure his own safety, his fate was sealed in the dark mind of the Chief Eunuch.

Scarcely had Li Lien Ying and his servants left the room when Fen-Sha and Follingsbee raised the lid of the coffin upon which Li had sat and wherein they were well-nigh suffocated and crawled out. Then they lifted the still unconscious A-lu-te from her gloomy couch in the second coffin and cau-

tiously made their way through the adjoining room out into the court. Hugging the shadow of the wall they were approaching the gates, when a shrill feminine shriek reached them, then another and another. Fen-Sha made a dash for the gates; Follingsbee followed, but not before he turned to verify a suspicion. In the doorway watching them stood the prettiest of the painted dolls they had encountered in Li's villa that day. Her expression was vindictive; her shrieks were loud; they were meant to penetrate to the garden, where the Chief Eunuch and his servants had gone.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE HUT OF A "DEVIL'S PUPIL"

"YOUR Majesty, my teacher was a plaiter of mats living in the village of Yang-lin."

S'ang was standing beside Kuang Hsü's chair. The Emperor was turning the leaves of a book new to him, called the Gospel of St. John. S'ang had been reading it aloud.

"A plaiter of mats? How comes it that he can read and is a teacher?"

"He was not always a plaiter of mats, your Majesty. Many years ago he was in the household of a foreign missionary, an old man killed by the people in the province of Shantung where he lived. Pu-lun escaped, for in their rage they tried to kill him also. He fled north, returning to his old home in Yang-lin. Here he weaves mats for a living and teaches all those who are willing to learn. The villagers do not molest him, for his reputation among them is that of an honest and industrious man. But neither do they listen to his teachings. He is not a scholar; his ignorance of the classics is as profound as that of any other plaiter of mats; yet when he speaks of God there lies in his tongue such

power as truth alone possesses. Those who will but listen to him cannot help believing; and when he reads from the Holy Book, a wonderful peace comes to the heart; misfortunes, the sorrows of this life grow vague, intangible, and rise from the heart to disappear like vapour from the boiling kettle."

"I would like to see and hear this man," murmured Kuang Hsü.

"That is easily arranged," returned S'ang quickly.

"What! Give audience in the Palace to a plaiter of mats? The idea is preposterous!"

"Your Majesty can see and hear him without summoning him to the Palace," suggested S'ang.

The young Emperor looked up eagerly. "Speak plainly," he commanded.

"Your Majesty can ride to the village of Yang-lin and go to the house of Pu-lun. It is not necessary that this be known to anyone. Yang-lin is not many *lis* distant; a cart is easy to procure; plain garments also. Your slave can drive a mule as well as another and the small gate near the East Gate Glorious has been used before this by those who desired to leave the Yellow City unobserved."

"By Buddha! The idea is good!" cried Kuang Hsü with delight. "The Emperor Ching was accustomed to roam the streets of Peking disguised as a common coolie to learn the disposition and character of his people. Why should not I follow his excellent example? Make ready. Let

it be known that I, having need of rest, have retired to my couch and must not be disturbed. Hasten."

Kuang Hsü's blood leaped and bounded in his veins with the joyful anticipation of freedom for a few hours from the gloomy restraint, the weary monotony of life in the Forbidden City.

S'ang was not long in making the needful arrangements. Dressed as a well-to-do gentleman of the middle class, Kuang Hsü sat on the floor of the blue-topped cart looking out on the streets of his capital, which, for the first time in his young life, were not deserted at his approach, and were not covered with yellow sand—how he had grown to hate that sand, part emblem of his solitariness! The shop doors and windows were not closed and multitudes of human beings were about him.

A prisoner escaped from his cell, breathing again the fresh air of the outdoor world, seeing again the blue sky over him, would have felt as young Kuang Hsü felt that day. He was no longer the lonely, unhappy bearer of the imperial title; he was a young man tingling with a sense of companionship heretofore denied him, elated by the sights and sounds about him of a busy workaday world. His pale, handsome face, habitually overcast by sadness, weariness, or the stormy clouds of an uncontrolled temper, now shone with gay audacity, with lively humour, with a disposition sweet as nature had originally intended it should be

but which fate in the shape of Tzŭ Hsi had changed the day she placed him on the Dragon Throne.

He felt immensely happy; frequently he left the cart to enter a shop, or tea-house; he laughed and bantered with S'ang, till the eunuch came near forgetting that this gay young fellow was the gloomy "Solitary One" of the Forbidden City.

Progress through the city was slow, because of Kuang Hsü's reiterated commands to halt, while he loitered in the streets and mingled with the crowds. They passed a wine shop, made fashionable by the young bloods of Peking. Song and laughter reached them from the open windows. Kuang Hsü, with a gay gesture to S'ang to wait, entered the shop. A dozen or more young dandies were in the room, their half-filled cups before them, their faces faintly wine-flushed. One of them was singing. The words were coarse, the melody untuneful. The song was applauded by everyone but Kuang Hsü. He seated himself at a small table and ordered wine from an attendant.

"Sir stranger," gibed a young blade near him, "it appears the song has not pleased you. You sing perhaps a better one when you drink with your friends?"

"When I drink with my friends?" A cloud passed over Kuang Hsü's face, as he repeated the question sombrely. His friends! Why he had not one! Then his manner changed again and a note of raillery crept into his voice, raillery at himself. "Would you hear my song?" he cried. And with-

out waiting for an answer, he raised high his wine-cup and sang:

"Here are flowers, and here is wine;
But where's a friend with me to join
Hand to hand and heart to heart
In one full cup before we part?

Rather than to drink alone,
I'll make bold to ask the moon
To condescend to lend her face
To grace the hour and the place.

Lo! she answers and she brings
My shadow on her silver wings;
That makes three, and we shall be,
I ween, a merry company.

The modest moon declines the cup,
But shadow promptly takes it up;
And when I dance my shadow fleet
Keeps measure with my flying feet.

Yet though the moon declines to tipple,
She dances in yon shining ripple;
And when I sing my festive song
The echoes of the moon prolong.

Say when shall we next meet together?
Surely not in cloudy weather;
For you, my boon companions dear,
Come only when the sky is clear."¹

¹ "On Drinking Alone by Moonlight." Li-tao-po, A.D. 720.

The song—the most fanciful drinking song poet ever wrote—was greeted with loud applause. Kuang Hsü waved his hand merrily, and stepping swiftly from the room entered his cart. S'ang whipped up the mule and drove rapidly through the city gates out on to the open country roads. |

When they came to the little village of Yang-lin, they found the streets practically deserted. A few old women and decrepit men were talking excitedly to one another across the thresholds of their homes. When the cart passed them, they shouted to S'ang, "The beggars are raiding Li Lien Ying's house."

They tried to impart in their tones a sense of horror as of a sacrilege committed, yet could not keep the pleasure they felt from their voices. They heard a low amused laugh issue from the interior of the cart and, casting discretion to the winds, their merriment became unconstrained.

But S'ang was frightened. He had forgotten that the Chief Eunuch's villa skirted Yang-lin. He had only thought to bring the young Emperor to hear Pu-lun, because the simple, venerable "little assistant of Jesus" had a power, an eloquence, which he, S'ang, was far from possessing.

"Is Li here?" he asked, bringing the mule to an abrupt halt.

"No. He comes every sixth evening, and it lacks three days of the time. I would give two strings of cash—if I had them—to see his face when he enters his house. I wager the beggars

will strip it bare—they won't leave anything!" cackled an old dame.

"You've lost!" came Kuang Hsü's voice gaily from behind the curtains. "They'll leave plenty of—vermin!"

The old men and women laughed again delightedly.

"There's a wag-tail for you!" they cried, and hobbled into the street to have a look at the lively occupant of the cart. But S'ang drove hastily away.

A few minutes later, sovereign and servant disappeared in the house of Pu-lun the plaiter of mats, the "little assistant of Jesus."

It may have been a half-hour afterwards that the villagers, rendered swift-footed with fear, ran down the highroad to the shelter of their homes, and the beggar army retreated Peking-ward. And it was an hour later that Fen-Sha, with A-lu-te in his arms, stood before Pu-lun's house while Follingsbee rapped loudly upon the door. Because no one admitted them, Follingsbee deliberately raised the latch to enter unbidden. The door was barred from within. Again he knocked peremptorily and again without avail. He stepped back to glance up at the sign and assure himself that they had not mistaken the house. It was this strange sign which had attracted their attention upon first entering the village with the beggars, and it was this sign which had induced them to seek here the help they hoped to obtain

for A-lu-te. Having convinced himself that he was not mistaken in the place, Follingsbee called boldly, "Open in the name of Jesus."

This brought a response. A venerable-looking old man opened the door, carefully closing it behind him.

"You have summoned me in the Master's name. I have come. What do you desire of me?"

"Your help." It was Fen-Sha who answered. "The youth here is exhausted. Take us in and help us to restore him. He needs food, drink, and rest."

"I cannot take you in, but I will give you what food I have. You can eat and rest on the roadside."

"Rest on the roadside!" said Fen-Sha angrily. "Old man, your hospitality to strangers is indeed munificent."

"You know the law when a stranger dies in a man's house," the old man reminded him deprecatingly.

"Yes—he is arrested—but the youth will not die if he is allowed to repose in peace and is given to eat and drink," pleaded Fen-Sha.

But the old man shook his head. "I cannot open my door to you. Let that suffice."

There was finality in his tone. Realizing the futility of threats or arguments Fen-Sha turned away despondingly, but Follingsbee detained him.

"Wait," he whispered, and turning to the old man said with meaning emphasis: "It is written,

'For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.'"

Pu-lun, for it was he, bent a glad inquiring look on Follingsbee. "You have read the Book? You are of the Faith?"

"I was born into it," he replied, "and my father and mother before me."

"Your blessings have indeed been great. Wait here. I will return to admit you." And Pu-lun slipped back into the house, closing the door with the same caution as before.

From the window of a neighbouring house, a sharp-visaged village pawnbroker listened to the conversation and scrutinized with quick comprehension the face of the still unconscious A-lu-te. It occurred to him that here was a method of diverting Cobbler's Wax Li's wrath from the inhabitants of Yang-lin, when he discovered what part they had played in the beggars' raid upon his villa. No sooner had Pu-lun admitted the three strangers, than the pawnbroker, with a crafty smile of satisfaction, left his own house and hastened toward Li Lien Ying's villa.

In the meanwhile Fen-Sha and Follingsbee found themselves in a small, miserably furnished room, yet clean beyond the customary appearance of so poor an abode.

"Lay the youth on the K'ang. I have brought fresh, cool water to moisten his face," said the old man.

When A-lu-te regained consciousness she saw

Fen-Sha bending anxiously over her. She gazed in wonder and could not believe it was really he. But when he dipped a cloth in the bowl of water he was holding and passed it over her forehead, she sighed happily as one who awakens to find herself in Paradise. "It is you!"

"A-lu-te!" and he gazed on her as if his eyes would not willingly leave her face again. Then the basin slipped from his hands and he dropped on his knees beside her.

A-lu-te raised herself on her elbow; she gently touched his bowed head. "I prayed that I might see you again, and now you have come," she whispered with a kind of rapt wonder in her voice.

"Yes, I have come, my A-lu-te."

Follingsbee stood silently near, but Pu-lun exclaimed, "The youth is a woman!"

They did not heed him. A-lu-te spoke again:

"I am sick, Fen-Sha. The thread of my life will soon be broken, but I die happy knowing you are safe." Her voice trailed off weakly, then suddenly grew strong for she called loudly, "S'ang!"

Fen-Sha thought her mind was wondering; he clasped her closer to him.

Again A-lu-te called, "S'ang!" and raising herself from the encircling arms of her lover, she said, "You were right. The God of the foreigner, the God of the Christian is all powerful, all merciful. I die believing and I die thanking Him."

Her pale face became as marble in its whiteness,

her eyes, which had been fixed straight before her, closed, her head sank on Fen-Sha's shoulder. She lay motionless as one who has ceased to breathe, who yields to death content to die in her lover's arms.

The pain in the heart of Fen-Sha was as the thrust of a two-edged sword.

"She is dead!" he said, and laid her gently back upon the K'ang.

Pu-lun had thrown a frightened glance at the door of the adjoining room when A-lu-te called out; he drew a sigh of relief on seeing it quickly close again. He now bent over A-lu-te, placing his ear close to her mouth. "She lives," he announced, straightening himself again. From a mat-covered box he took a bottle containing a yellowish fluid. Gently forcing A-lu-te's lips apart he poured a few drops of the liquid down her throat. He repeated this operation several times while Fen-Sha watched with suspense for signs of returning consciousness. When the dark eyes opened and smiled up at him, he sobbed with joy.

Follingsbee alone was not wholly absorbed in the scene. For some time he had become aware of vague, confused sounds in the distance.

He listened intently. The sounds grew momentarily louder, clearer; he could hear voices and the dull tramping of felt-soled shoes on the highroad.

He opened the door and threw a swift glance in the direction of Li's villa. Then he closed and barred the door.

Fen-Sha remained kneeling by the K'ang, clasping A-lu-te's hand.

"A word with you," said Follingsbee, touching Pu-lun on the shoulder. "Does that other door open on the rear of the house?"

"The house has but one entrance," replied the old man quickly.

"Has the room in there a window looking onto the back?"

"No," came again the quick reply.

But Follingsbee determined to see for himself and stepped toward the door. Pu-lun seized his arm. "It is but a closet—small, windowless, except for a narrow aperture admitting light. If you wish to leave my house, why do you not go as you entered—by the entrance door?"

"Because it is too late. Hark!"

The noise had increased without.

The old man listened unmoved. "The beggars are in the village—they came early this morning. My miserable house will not be molested—they know that I and my friends have nothing worth the taking."

"The beggars have gone. It is the Chief Eunuch and his attendants that you hear."

Still the old man remained unconcerned. "If it is the Chief Eunuch—which I doubt, for it lacks three days of the usual time of his coming—he is on the way to his villa and the people are greeting him."

"He is leaving—not going to his villa—nor are

the people greeting him. They are conducting him to your house," returned Follingsbee.

The old man's agitation became suddenly extreme. "Conducting him to my house! The Chief Eunuch coming here!" he cried. And raising his voice, he repeated again louder, "The Chief Eunuch coming here!"

The door of the adjoining room opened; a young man appeared on the threshold. His delicate patrician face seemed to command instant respect. Follingsbee had advanced threateningly when he first saw him, then involuntarily stood still. But when he detected a second face, with thin, womanish features, peering out from the background, he demanded, "What are you doing here?"

"So you are Fen-Sha?" said the young man, ignoring the question. His voice was in keeping with his face; it was indicative of birth and culture.

Hearing his name, Fen-Sha jumped to his feet and turned to see who had spoken, but Follingsbee replied, "I am not Fen-Sha, nor have you answered me. What are you doing here?"

An amused look came into the handsome face. "Well, I am glad you are not he. Your speech and your enunciation are atrociously bad."

With a quick step he approached the K'ang and glanced with lively interest at A-lu-te. He nodded reassuringly to her when she opened her eyes and looked up at him and indicated his desire that she should not attempt to rise. Then he bent his

keen intelligent gaze upon Fen-Sha. The two men looked at each other a moment in silence.

"It seems," said Kuang Hsü, "that she has succeeded after all. I hope you are worth the dangers she encountered and those she must still encounter."

"Who are you?" stammered Fen-Sha.

"I? Oh, I am only the Emperor." The smile in Kuang Hsü's large dark eyes was reflected in his voice.

"The Emperor!" exclaimed Fen-Sha and dropped upon his knees.

Notwithstanding his amazement, Follingsbee did not doubt the extraordinary assertion of this strange young man. He turned to see that Pu-lun also was kneeling.

"Your Majesty," said the old man, "your servant entreats you to retire again—the Chief Eunuch is on his way here."

"So you have said before. Well, then, let him come,—as indeed he seems to be doing with considerable noise," remarked the Emperor coolly.

S'ang now stepped from the inner room; he too pleaded with the Emperor not to let the Chief Eunuch find him there.

"We implore your Majesty to await in the inner room Li Lien Ying's departure. He will not look farther when he finds those he is seeking here." And S'ang pointed to A-lu-te lying on the K'ang. What more fitting than that she should be sacrificed, if by so doing the Emperor were spared the

evil machinations of the powerful Chief Eunuch! S'ang, himself, would willingly have given his own life for such a purpose. Would an imperial concubine do less?

Apparently A-lu-te was of the same opinion, for, in a feeble voice, she joined her entreaties to those of the eunuch.

Fen-Sha was still prostrate and said not a word.

Kuang Hsü looked from one to the other. "It is my will to remain and meet the Chief Eunuch here," he said. "No—not a word."

He turned to A-lu-te. "Relate rapidly all that has occurred."

In a low voice, stopping every now and again to get breath in her sick body, A-lu-te told him.

He did not interrupt her narrative. When she spoke of Tsing's memorial and the Empress Dowager's decision to await its arrival in the Palace before she decided upon her punishment, he listened with a certain strained attention which yet gave the impression that he was pursuing a train of thought of his own. And when A-lu-te expressed her conviction that the Chief Eunuch had deliberately permitted her to escape in order to seize her outside the Palace walls and contrive her death without the Empress Dowager's knowledge, Kuang Hsü nodded comprehendingly. She told him of her capture in the Inn of Peace and Security and of being bound and thrown into a dark, slimy grotto in the garden of Li's villa.

"It was well planned," murmured the Emperor

to himself, "also Li's fear must have been great. Does he know with certainty that which I now suspect? How can I find out?"

A thought came into his mind, a thought which grew with increasing rapidity, till, suddenly, it became a full-formed plan, and one which seemed to offer him much entertainment, for he smiled repeatedly. When A-lu-te concluded her pathetic tale, he said:

"Rise all of you, and you, Fen-Sha, listen to my words. "I will protect this lady from Li Lien Ying on one condition; refuse that condition and I, myself, will return her to the Summer Palace to the safe keeping of her Majesty, the Empress Dowager."

"The safe-keeping of the Empress Dowager," replied Fen-Sha bitterly, "is another mode of saying—the jaws of death."

The Emperor shook his head. "I do not think so," he said quietly, "but in any case my purpose is clear to you. Decide."

"The condition, your Majesty?" asked Fen-Sha and even as he spoke he moved nearer the K'ang. There was refusal in his attitude, a determination to defend A-lu-te with his last breath spoke from every muscle in his tense body.

The Emperor frowned. "You refuse already and without waiting to hear what you refuse. You are devoid of reason; your firmness is only the dogged stupidity of a man who trusts no one but

himself. Such a one is better under the ground than on top of it, for he invites calamities, not only upon himself but upon his family and his friends. The wise man trusts everyone until he has cause not to. In this way he maintains the dignity, the honour, of his race and serves Heaven and his fellow-beings."

A flush spread over Fen-Sha's face.

"Your Majesty, tell me the condition, and do not, I entreat you, forget in the telling that this maiden risked her life for me."

"You are to go in yonder inner room and take with you that uncouth-tongued fellow over there"—pointing to Follingsbee. "You are to keep the door, as well as your ears, tight shut, until I send for you."

Still Fen-Sha hesitated. He felt A-lu-te's soft hand closing over his, and her voice beseeching him: "Go, Fen-Sha; trust his Majesty as I, your betrothed, have already trusted him."

"I go then," replied Fen-Sha, pressing her little hand once to his forehead. He turned and walked slowly into the inner room, beckoning Follingsbee to follow.

"S'ang," said the Emperor, "go with him. See to it that their ears are kept tight shut."

The eunuch flung himself on his knees. "Let your slave remain with your Gracious Majesty, for you may need his services."

It was plain that S'ang was afraid to leave the Emperor alone with the Chief Eunuch.

"It is my wish," returned the Emperor shortly—and added, kindly, "Have no fear for me. Moreover remember that if Li Lien Ying sees you here, he will find a quick method of for ever relieving me of your services. Go."—

The door had scarcely closed behind the eunuch, when the outer door was burst open and the dark, scowling face of the Chief Eunuch was framed in the worm-eaten wood of the threshold.

Behind him stood his attendants and a crowd of villagers.

The Emperor had seated himself on the K'ang upon which A-lu-te had again sunk, overcome by weakness. But Pu-lun had stationed himself immediately in front of his sovereign, and it was he, therefore, upon whom Li's small baneful eyes rested. "Seize him," he rasped out.

Two men rushed forward to obey the order.

A kick landed one of them into the middle of the room, and an imperious voice said, "Put those dogs out and close the door. I would have speech with you."

At the sound of this voice, the Chief Eunuch's face became pale; on his forehead beads of sweat broke out and trickled into his eyes. He brushed his hands across his brow as one in a daze. The men amazed at the haughty words of the young stranger, and the apprehensive appearance of the powerful eunuch, slunk from the room without waiting to be ejected and joined the curious crowd outside.

But when the Chief Eunuch saw A-lu-te's terror-stricken face, his equanimity was restored. His lips curled in a sneer.

The Emperor spoke again haughtily. "You are forgetting the majesty of the Imperial Presence."

Very leisurely Li sank on his knees to make obeisance.

"I crave your Majesty's pardon; how could I be sure it was indeed the august presence in this vile hut? The Empress Dowager will scarcely believe the utterance of my tongue, when I inform her."

"There are other matters of transcendent importance she will find greater difficulty in believing, but the proofs which are here"—he touched his pocket—"will convince her. Your sands, Li, are running out," said the Emperor menacingly.

"Will your Majesty deign to explain?" asked the Chief Eunuch, and he was astonished to feel again a sense of fear creeping over him. How came the puppet Emperor here and what knowledge had he of Tsing's adopted daughter?

"A thunderbolt sent from heaven stops not to explain when it strikes. Answer me—Why did you connive at the escape of this lady from the Summer Palace?"

The Chief Eunuch looked with malice upon A-lu-te and replied, "I did not."

"You lie. Why did you withhold from her Majesty, the Empress Dowager, the knowledge that Ho-Shu had seized the runaway in the Inn

of Peace and Security and thrown her, by your order, in a vile grotto in the garden of your villa where she lay more dead than living until today?"

The Chief Eunuch had regained his composure. His fears that the Emperor was in possession of the secret he had taken such precaution to insure, were allayed. He believed that Kuang Hsü's interest in the affair was only that of a young man suddenly awakened to feminine charm. It was a danger the Old Buddha had foreseen if this girl were permitted to meet him. Also, the fact that the Emperor had slipped from the Forbidden City incognito and had entered the vile abode of a "devil's pupil"—for such he knew the old man Pu-lun to be, the villagers having so informed him, as well as the blatant sign on the fellow's door—would so inflame the wrath of the Old Buddha against the puppet that his words would have no weight. As for the girl—well, he would now be compelled to return her to the Summer Palace, but the breath would be out of her body before she arrived. He would see to that himself.

"Beyond a doubt your Majesty has been misinformed by foul and lying tongues. It is true that Ho-Shu found the woman and brought her for safe-keeping to my villa, but Ho-Shu, on his way to the Palace, was basely killed by unknown assailants. His dead body lies now in my villa awaiting the burial his noble sacrifice to duty deserves. My house was broken into by a beggar horde and the woman escaped again—by whose

assistance, perhaps, your Majesty knows better than I."

There was venom in the last remark. The subtlety of his explanations left the young Emperor with a miserable sense of helplessness as against a foe too powerful, too crafty to be downed. But the expression on his handsome face remained unchanged. He possessed more than the usual oriental capacity for concealing his feelings.

"I have another question awaiting your lying tongue—What have you done with Tsing's memorial?"

The Chief Eunuch started violently; he had not been prepared for this question. For an instant he could not speak. He regarded the Emperor in sudden horrible surmise. Kuang Hsü knew! He would use his knowledge to arouse the bitter anger of the Old Buddha against him. Twice within the last two days she had threatened him with banishment. It had required all his diplomacy, all the wiles of his crafty tongue to appease her. If she now heard that he had suppressed Tsing's memorial and was informed by the Emperor of its contents, nothing would save him from her wrath. Again the perspiration rolled on his cheeks.

"I do not know what your Majesty means," he managed to jerk out with a semblance of composure. But his consternation had not been lost upon young Kuang Hsü; he raised his hand to his mouth to conceal the smile of relief and satisfaction which twitched his lips.

"You lie clumsily," he said. "An end to this farce. Know then that I have in my possession the original draft of the memorial you suppressed. Tsing was a wise man in taking his precautions, for he sent this draft to a friend with instructions to forward it, after the lapse of a certain number of days, to me, his Sovereign Lord, with the statement that the memorial had already been presented to the Empress Dowager. It reached me in the Yellow City this morning. Yesterday her Majesty was still anxiously awaiting the document, not knowing that the courier had brought it to the Summer Palace long since; that it got as far as your hands and no farther. What have you to say?"

The Chief Eunuch stared sullenly before him. He reflected furiously that at last the hour of the puppet Emperor's triumph had struck, and his own power in the Palace would, before the sun dropped in the horizon, be no stronger than autumn thistle down. It mattered not whether the girl lying motionless on the K'ang lived or died, either way, she had brought ruin upon him, for the Old Buddha would as soon tear her eyes from their sockets as forgive him this offence against the majesty of her authority, and the crime against the mother-love crying in her heart. All at once he remembered his treasure vault. It contained sufficient wealth to insure a life of luxury to the end of his days. Why then wait to be banished—or what was quite as likely, decapitated? He would hasten back to the villa, take his gold, and

leave the country. He would live in Japan surrounded by every comfort money could purchase. Perhaps, after a time, the Old Buddha would relent, and—but the puppet Emperor was speaking again—curse him and the girl too—what was he saying now?

"It is apparent that you do not know what to say. I therefore will assist you. You will, without delay, inform the Lady A-lu-te of the contents of Tsing's memorial. Omit the smallest detail and I will present the original draft in my possession this very day to the Empress Dowager and tonight your head will sleep in the western confines of the Palace grounds and your feet in its uttermost eastern limits. Proceed."

The look of a crouching wild beast gleamed from the eyes of the Chief Eunuch. Kuang Hsü saw that look and smiled mockingly. He was no longer afraid of Li. He was playing a game in which he knew his opponent would be checkmated in the next move. Here was one of the moments in his life when the Emperor was the Emperor and the servant was the servant. He waited with haughty leniency, though inwardly aflame, while he granted the Chief Eunuch time for thought.

A-lu-te had gradually shifted her gaze from the Emperor, where she had sought and found courage, to the face of her enemy. With a chill which had in it something of foreknowledge she too waited for Li to speak,—a quivering expectant hush was in the little room.

Finally, in a voice which he scarcely recognized as his own, a voice which, dull, low, lifeless, seemed to be reciting words from a printed page, the Chief Eunuch repeated Tsing's memorial.

Kuang Hsü strained forward not to lose a syllable of his speech.

But A-lu-te slipped from the K'ang and stood with hands pressed to her bosom, lips apart, breathing quickly as one who has been running. Once the Emperor turned to look at her; he was startled by the play of emotion depicted on her face.

A-lu-te understood at last why her heart had gone out to the Great Old Buddha, why she never could learn to hate her. Her mother! She broke into low sobbing.

The Chief Eunuch ceased speaking.

"You have heard," said the Emperor exultingly, addressing A-lu-te. "It now remains for you to decide." And he asked almost pleadingly, "Will you return with me to the Summer Palace?"

"Return? No! no!" she answered vehemently, only to add quickly, "And yet—oh, I long to see her—to call her 'Mother'—to hear again her tender voice caressing me when she was pleased with me. Oh! Mother! Mother!" She fell to weeping violently. With an effort she controlled herself. "Is your Majesty convinced that she is indeed ignorant of my identity?" she asked.

"She does not know; yet the knowledge is in her heart. That she loves you, you yourself have

felt, for even in your disgrace Li Lien Ying could not induce her to punish you. If you return and the contents of Tsing's memorial are made known to her, your place in the Palace will be supreme. As for Li, if he is permitted to remain above ground, you may be sure it will not be in the Summer Palace or in Peking. In the great desert of Gobi are mean and wretched villages where such as he are sometimes given shelter for the remainder of their worthless lives."

While Kuang Hsü was speaking the Chief Eunuch listened, firmly resolved to carry out his hastily formed plan of escape without delay.

He did not know that at that very moment the servants left in his villa, after locking the women in their apartments, had robbed his treasure vault and were riding on his mules and horses at breakneck speed away from Yang-lin.

The Emperor's next words caused him to relax suddenly and wait eagerly for A-lu-te's decision.

"Your choice," continued the Emperor, "must be made here in this hut and, once made, it can never be altered. Reflect, therefore, carefully before you decide. Will you defy your hereditary element; will you choose poverty, disgrace, banishment, or wealth, luxury, power, the love of a great Empress, and the certainty of the punishment of a contemptible enemy?"

It may be that Kuang Hsü hoped her decision would give him at the court of his imperial aunt a valuable ally and friend—and Heaven knew he was

sorely in need of one—or it may be he was frankly curious to test the strength of her affection for her lover, now that she knew herself to be a royal princess, a member of the imperial family. He added that if she elected to follow the fortunes of a disgraced man—he took care not to allude directly to Fen-Sha—then she must swear never to divulge to a living soul the secret of her birth. If she failed to keep her oath, she would be supplying the political friends of her adopted father with a weapon to bring disgrace not only upon her mother, the Empress Dowager, but upon the Manchu Dynasty. For such base conduct the curse of Heaven would descend upon her and her sons—if she bore any—and her sons' sons—and also upon all her ancestors.

As the Chief Eunuch listened, he realized that if she linked her fate with that of her lover—then he, Li Lien Ying, could with perfect security return to the Palace, and Kuang Hsü would be powerless to injure him, for he too would be implicated in the plot of withholding from the Old Buddha all knowledge of her daughter's existence. The sickening physical sense of dread—entirely new in his experience of himself—which had assailed Li twice in this wretched hut, left him. Without knowing why, he was convinced what answer the girl would give. He felt safe and the puppet Emperor, he told himself, was even more of a fool than he had taken him to be, in that he failed to embrace the only opportunity he ever

had, or ever would have again, to crush his enemy.

"My choice is made," said A-lu-te in a low firm voice. "I follow him who is in disgrace, who must live in banishment."

Something plucked at certain strings untouched heretofore at Kuang Hsü's heart. He looked at her with young eyes which had never known happiness and a sigh, involuntary, unsuppressed, escaped from him.

"You have decided, then. Now swear."

And A-lu-te swore to keep hidden for ever the secret of her birth.

For once in his life, the Chief Eunuch forgot his malice, his thirst for revenge. He was indeed almost tempted to thank A-lu-te. He thought better of it however and waited silently until it should please the Emperor to address him. He had not long to wait.

"Open the door and disperse the people. You are not to return," said Kuang Hsü.

Now there was something the Chief Eunuch wished to make sure of before he left.

As long as that draft of Tsing's memorial remained in the Emperor's possession he could not return to the Palace with any feeling of security. There was always the chance that at some future period Kuang Hsü would determine to ruin him by giving the document to the Empress Dowager. That draft, therefore, must be destroyed.

"Your Majesty," he spoke with impertinent

composure, "there is a little matter which you have forgotten. May your servant remind you of it?"

"Speak," said the Emperor, frowning.

"That draft of Tsing's memorial—your Majesty has not destroyed it."

The frown in Kuang Hsü's face disappeared. He raised his eyebrows and smiled as if amused by a sudden thought.

"Ah, to be sure—I had forgotten it. But no matter—it is not my intention to destroy the draft."

"Your Majesty had best reconsider," warned the Chief Eunuch, and added slowly, that his words might sink in, "If it is not destroyed here, now, it will be the duty of your servant to inform the Great Old Buddha of all that has transpired in this place this morning."

A-lu-te uttered a faint cry, but Kuang Hsü only continued to smile amusedly. "You are then, it seems, determined to risk losing your head after all," he commented pleasantly.

Li glared at him with a look of concentrated hate. "The risk is great, no doubt," he replied, "but what of that? If I tell, there are others here also who will be as a lighted candle between open doors. If I keep silent and Tsing's draft is not destroyed what assurance have I that it will not be used some day against me?"

The Emperor laughed softly. "Ah! So! Blows the wind from that quarter? Well, compose

yourself, your fears are groundless." He laughed again.

Li scowled. He did not like this ebullition of gaiety, the reason for which he failed to comprehend.

"Shall I tell you why, Li?" the Emperor asked suddenly.

Something in his manner and mocking speech made the Chief Eunuch ponder uneasily.

"Why, then?" he enquired. There was less assurance in his voice than before.

"Because," returned the Emperor gaily, "because I have received no draft, because, as far as I know, Tsing did not write or send a draft, because my knowledge of his memorial addressed to the Empress Dowager dates from this hour, and my knowledge of its contents comes from your own lips."

The Chief Eunuch stared at him dumb with anger. His lips twitched; his writhing face grew deathly pale. Clearly the Emperor had spoken the truth and he, Li Lien Ying, had played into his hands like any fool! He ground his teeth. Then his rage gave place to a sense of terror, and amazement that this young man for whose capabilities—except as a scholar—he had entertained the liveliest contempt should not only have outwitted him but forced him, by his own words, to betray himself. He was no longer the puppet to be scorned; he was an enemy to be feared.

But the humour of the situation had endured long enough for Kuang Hsü.

"Open the door," he commanded, "and disperse the people outside. You are not to return."

Mechanically the Chief Eunuch obeyed. The next minute his shrill harsh voice could be heard ordering the men to return to their work and the women to their household duties.

Inside the hut, Pu-lun, obeying an imperative signal from the Emperor, summoned Fen-Sha from the inner room. Addressing himself to the young reformer, Kuang Hsü said, "It is my desire that you leave the Empire without delay. You are to go to Kobe and to return only at such a time as I shall indicate in the future. You will have a companion in exile whose character is full of gentleness, love, and loyalty to her duty. You will therefore never give her cause to regret going with you. You will live with her in perfect harmony nor by word or deed sadden her heart. You have heard her say she is a believer in the God of the Western World, the God of the foreigner. Pu-lun is a priest of that faith. He will perform the ceremony of marriage between you here in my presence."

At these words, Fen-Sha threw himself with vehemence at the feet of the Emperor. "Your Majesty has given his servant not life alone, but happiness. May Heaven grant your Majesty length of days and may your fame grow till it

illuminates every dark place in this land our ancestors have taught us to love."

A-lu-te had prostrated herself beside Fen-Sha while she too thanked the Emperor by repeatedly knocking her head on the floor.

Kuang Hsü beckoned the venerable "little assistant to Jesus."

"Proceed," he ordered curtly.

The old man approached holding in his hand a gourd filled with water. He sprinkled a few drops upon the bowed head of A-lu-te. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, Amen."

Turning to Fen-Sha he said solemnly, "Son, will you also become a follower of Christ?"

Fen-Sha replied: "He is a God of Mercy and of Justice. Baptize me into the Faith."

Pu-lun baptized him; having done so he joined the hands of Fen-Sha and A-lu-te and, reading the marriage ceremony, pronounced them man and wife.

All the while Kuang Hsü sat with an inscrutable expression upon his clear-cut handsome face.

When the young married pair turned to him again with shining grateful eyes, he drew from his belt a well-filled purse and placing it on the K'ang, said, "The bride must not come to her husband empty-handed. She is without the customary presents—the contents of this purse will serve to purchase them."

He called S'ang—who, with Follingsbee, had

been a delighted spectator to this scene. "Come," he said, "it is time." With a graceful wave of his hand and without another word he left the hut. A few minutes later a blue-topped cart was driven rapidly out of the village of Yang-lin.

CHAPTER XXVII

BECAUSE OF LLA THE BACTRIAN CAMEL

LONG after dark that same day, a shabby country cart, drawn by a mule well past his prime, was moving along the highway toward Peking.

In the cart reclining on soft cushions was A-lu-te. She was clad in clean garments procured for her in the village by Pu-lun. She was smiling happily, her eyes seeking ever those of Fen-Sha who walked close beside the cart.

Follingsbee strode at the head of the mule to guide and urge him onward. The road was empty. The country-folk who took their products to the city were still asleep. Fen-Sha and A-lu-te conversed together in low tones. The dreadful past lay behind them; the future held forth promises of a new life of blissful happiness.

Once, and once only, A-lu-te after a long, sweet silence sighed sadly.

"What is it, my A-lu-te?" asked Fen-Sha anxiously. She was still weak and he feared for her.

"It is nothing, beloved. My thoughts wandered for a moment from you and carried me back to the Summer Palace and the Empress Dowager."

"My Lotus Bud, forget those terrible days and with them that sinful old woman."

A-lu-te placed her little hand on his arm and said in a quivering voice: "Fen-Sha, you are the heart of my heart, the best beloved in the world to me. For your sake I am ever ready to give my life. Knowing this will you make me one small promise?"

Pressing her slender hand to his breast, he answered, "I promise, my A-lu-te. Tell me what you would have me do?"

"Only this," her tones trembled with suppressed emotion: "never again, my beloved, never again speak of the Empress Dowager except with reverence and kindness. You will promise your A-lu-te this?"

Astonishment seized him at a request which to him was strange beyond comprehension. But he attributed it to the fevered fancy of one weakened by past suffering. He soothed her with gentle words, promising all she asked. Then, still holding each other's hands, they began to dream of the future.

Dawn was breaking when they approached Peking. It was the plan of Fen-Sha to conceal A-lu-te in the house of her old *amah* while he made needful arrangements for their journey to Tientsin where they would board a steamer for Japan.

While they waited for the huge city gates to swing back on their iron hinges and admit again

the outer world to the capital of the Celestial Empire, A-lu-te summoned Follingsbee to her side.

She greeted him with a manner so gracious and winning and again thanked him with so much proud humility for all he had done for Fen-Sha and herself, that he could only marvel at the charm of her.

Follingsbee did not enter the city with his companions.

"I have an errand in a village," he said as the gates swung wide.

"An errand?" puzzled Fen-Sha.

But Follingsbee offered no explanations, and evinced such keen impatience to be off, Fen-Sha did not seek to detain him. It was only later in the day when, leaving A-lu-te in the humble home of her old *amah*—who hovered delightedly about her,—he had set out to procure a boat for their river journey, that it suddenly came to him what this errand was, upon which Follingsbee had gone.

"The Bactrian camel!" he ejaculated.

The thought disturbed him. Would Follingsbee risk the danger of returning to Peking on a white camel of the breed the gate guards were warned to seize together with its rider? He did not doubt it. Something of the animal's story Follingsbee had related to him the night they waited in his rooms before joining the beggars in their descent upon Yang-lin.

Fen-Sha knew the American would keep his word to the Mongol owner of the white Bactrian camel. Slowly he retraced his steps to the old *amah's* house. He and A-lu-te must remain in Peking until he was assured of his friend's safe return.

Follingsbee in the meanwhile was seeking the village where Lla, the camel, had been left. In the exciting events following their arrival in the capital with the son of the Beggar King, the name of the place had gone from him and he had to travel from one village to another until he finally came upon it. The headman kept his word; the camel was turned over to Follingsbee on the presentation of the visiting card. News did not reach the large inland towns with any degree of rapidity, and far less the small villages scattered over the great Pechili plain. So it happened that the reward offered by the Peking authorities for the arrest of any man riding a white Bactrian racing camel was still unknown to the country folk of this district. Before leaving the village, Follingsbee purchased for a few copper cash a pot of black paint and provided himself, for an equally small sum, with an earthenware receptacle, some oil, a large brush, and a sack of salt. These purchases made, he fastened them securely to the saddle of the camel, mounted the beast, and rode leisurely off.

On the banks of a small sluggish stream, bordered with tall grass and well away from all habitations,

he alighted and alone in the solitude began to occupy himself in a curious manner.

He mixed the paint in the earthenware receptacle with the oil and stirred the contents vigorously. When the consistency of this black liquid compound suited him, he seized the sack of salt and, first cautiously [scrutinizing the landscape in every direction to assure himself that he was alone and unobserved, he approached the camel, comfortably browsing on the succulent grass.

"Sok!" "Sok!" he cried, and at the word the huge ugly creature knelt obediently, though with a vicious look showing in the corners of her eyes.

Follingsbee opened the salt sack and powdered its contents on the ground. The camel set to licking up the salt with manifest relish. Follingsbee seized the brush, dipped it in the liquid paint he had crudely prepared, and applied the first splashy stroke to the camel's dirty white body. He was interrupted in this picturesque occupation by the brute herself who rose up with mouth savagely opened as if intent upon biting the artist and changing her mind dashed madly off over the plain.

The immediate result of this unexpected flight was to leave Follingsbee staring stupidly.

To pursue the camel with any expectation of catching her was too hopeless to be worth contemplating. He watched her until she disappeared behind a hillock in the distance.

"Damn," said Follingsbee, then broke into a

laugh. He reflected philosophically that since he had lost the camel, he might as well retain what was left to him, namely his temper.

He threw himself on the ground beside his carefully prepared paint-pot and being fatigued soon fell fast asleep. The air grew cold as twilight fell and the night advanced. Cramped and chilled Follingsbee awakened to find the moon high in the heavens and brightly shining. Very distinctly he heard a low deep bubbling sound. He turned his head to see Lla with her neck stretched out and legs curled under her, resembling in the vague light of the moon a prehistoric monster. She had returned to finish her feast of salt.

As rapidly as was consistent with cautious movement Follingsbee crept towards her and seized the rope attached to her neck. Lla turned and watched him suspiciously. He tied her neck and forelegs securely together and having done so he lost no time in again applying the black paint to her body. For a while the camel struggled frantically to release her fastenings, then with true oriental submission to fate, became passive and fell to licking up the salt again.

In the course of a couple of hours the task which Follingsbee had set himself was completed and Lla's coat was transformed from a dirty white to a deep smutty black. Follingsbee stepped back and surveyed his work with satisfaction. He now gathered some brushwood and made a fire near

which he stretched himself and once more slept. Soon after dawn broke he was up. To his delight he found the compost on Lla's shaggy coat quite dry. He untied the ropes which fastened her, seated himself in the saddle, and set out for Peking where he arrived a few minutes before the opening of the gates. A caravan from the north was waiting for admittance into the capital and country people with farm products in baskets slung on long poles across their shoulders, or in panniers on the backs of donkeys, and in wheelbarrows, crowded the highroad.

The black camel and her rider attracted no attention. Everyone was engrossed in a more interesting spectacle. Three wicker cages were being suspended from the wall; in each cage was a head, one of them hideous beyond conception. Follingsbee looked at this head, and as he looked, the short, matted hair, the repulsive features, the deep, sunken sockets resembling dark, crater-like pits, suddenly grew horribly familiar. Where had he seen that head before it was severed from its trunk? Ah! now he remembered; it was the Beggar King! Upon him at least the Chief Eunuch had had his full and prompt revenge.

The gates opened and in the wake of the caravan Follingsbee entered the city, unchallenged by the guards, who did not cast a second glance at the big black camel he was riding.

Before he passed through the gates he saluted the trunkless head in the centre cage. However

vile the Beggar King might have been in life, he had at least not failed in two things worthy of respect: He had repaid a debt of gratitude and had loyally kept a promise.

Follingsbee made his way to the Mongol market.

At certain seasons of the year this market has the greatest commercial activity of any place in the capital. Here are unloaded the large caravans, which arrive from the most distant part of the Empire. The uproar and confusion at this time is indescribable. The shrieking of the camels mingles with the bawling of the buyers and sellers; man and beast seem to vie with each other to make the loudest noise.

Flat-faced Mongols with scanty beards, prominent cheek bones, and tint of saffron display their wares with rollicking good nature. The great leathern boots and large sheepskin coats give them a ponderous look in strong contrast to the agility displayed by the Chinese merchants of petty shops, threading their way through the crowded market appraising with cunning eye the exact value of every Mongol's wares the better to cheat him later. These were the sharks of the trade; for merchants of large and reputed business establishments were not given to dishonest trickery.

Huge rolls of handsome furs were spread out on the ground, conical piles of salt, mushrooms so enormous they resembled the tops of large round teapots. Here and there were handsome brass

samovars received in trade from some travelling Russian pedlars in the northern country. But by far the greatest display was made with the sheep, oxen, mules, horses, and camels offered for sale.

The Mongol market was especially noted for its trade in camels. These animals were ranged in rows, their forefeet raised in slight dirt elevations to accentuate their height; or they were kneeling to be heavily loaded and then made to rise to display their prodigious strength.

Among those who were examining the camels was our Mongol friend, the owner of Lla.

His face was puckered and anxious looking. He had long since bitterly repented having permitted a wayfaring stranger to ride off on his favourite animal in order to prove her fleetness and to win a wager. He was not only more than skeptical concerning the integrity of this stranger, but his own life had been made miserable by threats of the Bannerman to arrest him if at the end of the week the rider of the white Bactrian camel did not turn up at the Hotel of the Five Felicities, where the Bannerman daily lay in wait for him.

The last day but one had arrived and the Mongol's fear of arrest had augmented to such a degree that he determined to wait no longer for the possible return of the beast, but, instead, to purchase a good camel in the market, slip from the capital that very day, and return to the peaceful land of grass without delay. As he had had this step in con-

temptation for some time, he had already quietly despatched his boy servant with the animals and the tents to the village of Ta Lou lying on the route to the Great Wall and instructed him to await there his arrival.

He was now examining attentively the camels for sale in the market. He lingered before one animal whose size and strength seemed suitable for his purpose. Its owner, a Tibetan, watched the inspection with indifference.

It was precisely at this moment that the little Mongol saw a big black camel led by a man who was peering to the right and left, carefully scanning the faces of those about him. The Mongol rubbed his eyes and looked again. The size, the shape, the awkward gait of the camel were those of his beloved Lla, but the colour was not her colour. Lla was a beautiful white, he told himself, and this beast was a hideous black. Then his eyes fell on the man leading the camel. He gave a loud shout and, springing forward, seized the rope from his hand.

"Ah! I have caught you at last, Sir Stranger! What devil's deed have you done to my beloved Lla that now she is black where formerly she was pearl white? Ah! I would my lips had grown shrivelled and sore and my tongue cracked and dry before I trusted you with my Lla!"

In his excitement he forgot everything but the return of his cherished camel and the black insult staring at him from her shaggy coat.

Follingsbee answered in low tones. "Not so loud! Not so loud! I returned with what speed I could, my Brother. I was even now on my way to the Hotel of the Five Felicities. As for the colour, 'twas necessary—I cannot explain—but a white camel would not have been permitted to pass the city gates."

The little Mongol suddenly remembered the Bannerman and the five hundred taels reward offered for the capture of the rider of his white racing camel. He glanced fearfully about; he hoped no one had heard his angry accusations. But already the men in their vicinity were crowding around them to examine the camel. They were not long in detecting her spurious colouring.

"Yes! Yes!" they shouted, "the beast has been dyed! There can be no doubt about it!"

"Behold!" cried one, "here is the proof!" And dipping his hand in a vessel containing water he rubbed his wet palm along the camel's side and leg, then triumphantly held the blackened hand up for inspection.

The others were delighted with the simplicity of this demonstration; they too moistened their hands and, vigorously rubbing the animal, obtained the same results. This damning evidence produced a profound sensation. A score of men fell upon Follingsbee, while others seized the rope the Mongol was clutching.

"We have read the placards!" they shouted. "This is the camel wanted by the authorities and

this is the man who rode it. Let him not escape; secure him well! The five hundred taels' reward is ours!"

In their determination to have a share in Follingsbee's capture and therefore in the offered reward, they came near to tearing him to pieces. Their shrill cries as they fought, madly plunging, panting for his possession, attracted others to the scene. A charcoal pedlar, with face so soiled from handling his commodity he might have been a blackamoor, harangued the fighters. "Imbeciles! If you cease not your foolish fighting and kill him amongst you, how will you prove to the magistrates he is the man who rode the camel? Let him live that he may testify himself before the judges who know well how to make the boldest liar speak truth—for so only will we be sure of our reward."

"There is sense in what he says," shouted the men who had been unable to get their clutch on Follingsbee.

"If he convicts himself," continued the charcoal pedlar, "—and a few hours kneeling on coiled chains will help his memory marvellously well—then the five hundred taels will be paid us. Not even the wildest magistrate would dare trick us out of what is ours by Imperial Decree."

"He speaks with judgment," again shouted those in the rear. Even the men nearest their captive were impressed with the wisdom of the pedlar's counsel.

"Yes. Let him confess to the magistrates," they cried.

"Quick then! Cover him well, lest the Banner-men yonder see him and claim for themselves our just reward!" cried a man.

Someone threw an empty sack over Follingsbee's head and tied it below his waist line.

In the smothering dust of this covering he gasped and choked for breath and with his teeth tried to tear an opening to reach the free air.

A sharp prick, as of a knife, and a ripping sound came to him. Another moment and he drew cleaner breath. The rasping voice he had heard haranguing the mob about him said: "I stuck him—the pig—a little blood-letting will quiet him and make him easier to lead to market."

The men laughed, pleased with the jest.

The same voice went on: "Dump him into my coal cart; we'll drive him to the magistrates; 'twill be the quicker way. I will sit on top of him; one of you drive; the others can follow afoot, though they must run fast to keep pace with us, for my animal is a marvel for speed! He has passed his fifteenth year and lives high on two beans and a half a day."

The mob, rendered good humoured by the jokes of the pedlar, accepted his leadership and were prompt to obey.

Follingsbee felt himself lifted bodily up and thrown into a charcoal cart. He could feel the

filled sacks under him and the jocose leader over him and hear his voice again directing:

"Let the camel follow. So,—all quiet now and forward. I will hide the fellow's feet with these sacks lest some sharp eye catch sight of them and accuse me of stealing the Mongol's woman for wife." And he pointed to the fat little Mongol still clinging tenaciously to the rope about Lla's neck.

A roar of laughter followed this speech, for the women of "the Grass Country" with their unbound feet were the butt of frequent and coarse jests among the Chinese, who admired extravagantly the "lily-formed" feet of their own women.

The procession started. The pedlar watched the men running beside his cart and chanted derisively at them the refrain of labourers engaged in their work:

"Ohé! Oha? Oho-ho. Ohé! Oha? Oho-ho."

And while he sang he cut surreptitiously the cord binding Follingsbee in his sack. Then he skilfully shifted his seat from the back of his prisoner to a bag of charcoal close by.

Follingsbee, feeling the man's weight no longer holding him, began cautiously to extricate himself from his covering. He was rising, when a hand pressed him quickly down and the pedlar whispered in English:

"Lie still—till I give the signal!"

"Fen-Sha!" gasped Follingsbee. "Is it you?"

"Yes. Hush! Don't move on your life!" returned the pedlar.

The cart rattled slowly on. Above them the cloudless sky was yellowing. The Bactrian camel sniffed the air uneasily; she scented a storm. Only her Mongol owner noted her warning and scanned the heavens with sly satisfaction.

Fen-Sha counted on sheer audacity in rescuing Follingsbee.

Audacity is often an excellent steed, yet there are times when it outruns the proper pace of true success and, tripping, throws its purpose. And so it was now.

While Fen-Sha waited for a favourable opportunity of dashing from the cart with Follingsbee, he sought to entertain the men surrounding them with spicy gossip. Finally he said: "Have you heard of the great robbery?"

"Where?" they cried.

"In Cobbler's Wax Li's villa, near Yang-lin. The servant of his household robbed his treasure vault."

"Ho!" they shouted delightedly. "Cobbler's Wax Li robbed! Tell us about it."

They crowded closer around the cart; some climbed up on the sides of the vehicle. The man who was driving turned in his seat the better to hear, forgetting to guide his horse.

"Get down! Get down!" cried Fen-Sha, trying to push the men off. "You are impeding our progress. My animal cannot haul the lot of you," he warned them.

"We will descend after you have related the story of this robbery."

Realizing the futility of force, either physical or argumentative, Fen-Sha made the best of a situation which he inadvertently had rendered more dangerous than before.

"Very well, I will tell you the story," he said.

"How came you by it?" asked the driver, a big, surly fellow.

"I heard it from the country folk, to be sure, and so could have you, had you been by the Western Gates early yesterday morning engaged in your noble and lucrative trade of gathering dung, instead of lazily snoring on a sack of the stuff in your mother-in-law's house," returned Fen-Sha coolly.

The driver opened his mouth to retort angrily, but the others roared with laughter.

Suddenly they ceased laughing to watch the driver, who was grimacing curiously and pointing at the floor of the cart.

"The prisoner," he shouted, "has his head out of the sack! Who untied him? Why, that base-mouthed fellow there! Seize him!"

The expression of wonder and wavering on the faces of the men changed to grim resolve as they too caught sight of Follingsbee's uncovered head. Fen-Sha pitched the driver headlong onto the ground, while Follingsbee, aware that the moment had come, sprang to his feet and hit to the right and left with such vigorous purpose, the men

balanced on the sides of the cart fell off. The fight was now on again in more deadly earnest than before. Others in the market attracted by the yells rushed to learn the cause of the fray and learning joined lustily in it with the hope of sharing in the reward.

If the elements themselves had not that moment come to the assistance of the two friends fighting for their lives, their fate would have been sealed.

The wind, which had begun to blow violently, of a sudden increased in fury. The sky still remained cloudless, but its yellow tinge had turned a deeper hue and looked opaque as if a thick curtain had been drawn across the entire breadth of the heavens. This curtain now descended and was transformed into minute particles of sand which stung the faces of men and beasts with whiplash fierceness. Whirl clouds of dust grew into enormous columns carrying up with them the refuse of Peking's streets to mingle with the sand from the great Gobi desert. This agglomeration was dashed about like the waves of a sea in a hurricane. The air became so thick it was difficult to distinguish an object a few paces distant. The shouts of the people rushing for shelter, mingled with the whistling of the wind. Men crouched beside their camels; most of these beasts had dropped on their knees and stretched their long necks close to the ground. Instinct taught them what was best to do.

Riders of mules and horses threw their arms

across their eyes and dashed blindly through the market, indifferent to the cries, if indeed they heard them, of those who were knocked down beneath the hoofs of their animals. Never had Peking known such a sandstorm, and only travellers crossing the great deserts of the north had witnessed the like before.

The fighters were hitting out blindly, scarce able to see for the dust and sand flints in their eyes. Suddenly the shouts of the men leading the Bactrian camel rose above the yells of the fighters.

Lla had broken loose from the rope and with long, swinging, incredibly swift strides was bearing down upon them. On her back, leaning far over, whispering in her ear, was the fat little Mongol.

Some of the fighters were tramped upon by the flying hoofs of the Bactrian beast; others were kicked. Among the latter was the driver who had made himself leader of the mob around the cart. He had no more stomach for blows, his own having been knocked in.

Amid the wild confusion caused by Lla's plunge Fen-Sha and Follingsbee leaped from the cart. A moment after, they disappeared in the dust clouds sweeping through the Mongol market while the hoarse-throated roar of the men vainly pursuing them was lost in the great wind from the Gobi desert smiting the four corners of Peking.

A few hours later on the road which passes the Ming Tombs, many miles north of Peking, a Bactrian racing camel with curious black streaks

on her huge dirty white body might have been seen running like the wind. The fat little Mongol on her back was smiling happily.

Far away, in the opposite direction, a boat was gliding swiftly down the Pei-ho. On the mat-covered deck, hand in hand, sat Fen-Sha and A-lu-te. They too were smiling happily.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON THE CITY WALL

THE sand storm which blew over Peking that morning threatened to spoil the picnic-tea Princess Pontioff was giving on the Tartar City wall. The storm, however, though sharp and fierce, was of short duration and the guests, leaving their ponies at the foot of the esplanade, merrily mounted the wall to join their hostess. But Betty's gaiety was forced. The German Chargé d'Affaires commented about it in a low voice to the Princess. She threw a kindly glance at the girl. "I hear her father contemplates sending her home to complete her education," she said. "She does not want to go. An education seems to her a superfluous adjunct to a pleasant life. Perhaps she is right; who knows? I am myself fairly happy, yet never have I mastered the multiplication table!" And the Princess smiled as she sipped her tea.

"By-the-way," remarked a young Customs man to the company in general, "have any of you heard about the plucky Chinese chap who rode a racing camel to Tientsin and by presenting

a fraudulent imperial decree effected the escape of the reformer Fen-Sha, condemned to die that very day?"

"Really!" said the Princess voicing the languid interest of her guests; "do tell us about it."

A pronounced characteristic of foreign society in the Chinese capital was its indifference to, even ignorance of, events which took place as it were under its very nose. If new concessions were granted to foreign countries, or reparation demanded for injuries done missionaries, merchants, or travellers, or if trade privileges were wrung from the reluctant Yamen by a rival state, if any or all of these things occurred, diplomatic society in Peking knew about it and was interested or not according to the degree of importance attached to each fact.

But of affairs pertaining exclusively to the Chinese themselves, foreign society did not trouble its head. So it happened that while every Pekingese of high or low estate was discussing the extraordinary escape from prison of the great reformer Fen-Sha and the capture of the notorious but unknown camel rider in the Mongol market that morning, it remained for a youthful Customs man at a picnic-tea to express the first mild interest of foreigners in either event.

Only Betty evinced a keen desire to hear his remarks. She leaned forward eagerly to listen.

"Sing, my house-boy, is my informant," he continued; "he says in the tea-houses nothing

else has been talked of for the past three days. Tonight there will be an exciting climax to discuss, for it is reported that this morning the fellow was caught in the Mongol market with his camel, which he had stained black. If true, of course he will be decapitated. I never thought I would care a brass farthing whether a pigtailed Chinaman got his celestial head chopped off or not, but, by Jove, I would jolly well like to hear this chap was out of the clutches of the officials."

"I believe there is a curious report circulating around that the camel rider was not a Chinese," said the first secretary of the French Legation.

Betty caught her breath sharply and turned pale.

"Whether he is a Chinaman, Jap, Corean, or native of Timbuctoo doesn't much matter, for tomorrow he'll be clay anyway," asserted the young Customs man.

Betty's pallor became more pronounced. Captain Bertram was seated beside her; he regarded her anxiously. "Oh, I say! You mustn't take the affair so much to heart. The Chinese courts are always executing men you know, and besides," he added quickly, for Betty was looking at him with eyes big with a dreadful horror, "besides, the fellow isn't dead yet you know."

She staggered to her feet. "It's—it's getting close again," she gasped.

"What a tender-hearted little girl you are!" he mentally commented. Aloud he said, "Yes,

beastly close," ignoring the fact that the air was as always after a sand storm singularly clear and fresh.

Betty leaned on the parapet and gazed with unseeing eyes on the street below. The road stretching along this portion of the Tartar City wall was the least frequented of any in the capital. It was deserted now except for the *mafoos* in charge of the ponies. Bertram talked of the tennis match soon to come off, of the "minstrel show" to be given by a half score of English Legation students, who, he laughingly assured Betty, had never seen a "nigger" in their lives and much less knew how they talked.

While he was engaged in efforts to divert her, he saw in the distance a Chinese turn into the street below. The man was running like a streak, his long legs leaping over the ground. Fifteen or twenty Chinese were in hot pursuit, yelling loudly. His eyes were bulging; flecks of foam trickled from his mouth.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Bertram, watching him, "what a sprinter! Didn't know a Chinaman could go like that. Runs as though he had been trained on a 'varsity track team. See how his legs go high out in front and not far out behind and how his arms move in unison with them!"

The shouts of the men as they drew nearer became more distinct. The *mafoos* jumped from their squatting positions by the ponies, with evident intention of intercepting the racer.

Betty, watching it all, felt a sudden tightening in her throat without knowing why. "What are they calling?" she asked.

Bertram leaned far over the parapet straining to catch the words. "As I'm living! they're saying he is the camel rider for whose capture five hundred taels have been offered!"

Betty's face went perfectly white.

"Oh, Captain Bertram, save him! Save him!" she cried. Her blue eyes were raised imploringly to his face; her own was drawn with terror. "He is—" she whispered through parched lips—"he is John Follingsbee!"

Sudden comprehension came to Bertram. He looked into Betty's agonized face, then without a word tore down the esplanade near which they had been standing.

Betty's intuitions were right. When Follingsbee returned to the capital after seeing A-lu-te and Fen-Sha safely embarked on the river, he was recognized by a man who had helped in his capture in the Mongol market that morning. The fellow gave the alarm and the chase began. Follingsbee could have outstripped his pursuers had not others, attracted by their cries, constantly taken the place of those who dropped behind.

The *mafoos*, seized with the contagion of the man chase and stimulated by the knowledge of the reward, stood ready to intercept him.

Follingsbee raised his bulging, bloodshot eyes and saw them. He felt then that the race for his

life was lost. Behind him the pursuers were gaining. At this moment Bertram reached the street.

"Get my horse!" he shouted to his *mafoo*. "Take him to the middle of the road and wait. Be quick! I'll divide five hundred taels among every *mafoo* here if this man escapes!"

Even as he shouted he ran to meet Follingsbee and turning again he kept alongside of him setting the pace for the panting racer.

"It's all right, old man!" he encouraged him. "Keep it up just a little longer. Don't drop, don't drop! *don't drop!* A-ah! here's the horse. Now! Ready! Mount!"

With an almost superhuman effort Follingsbee, whose breath was coming in short painful gasps, leaped into the saddle. Bertram struck the horse a stinging blow on his haunches and the animal tore down the street. After that Bertram turned and coolly faced the mob now screaming furiously and vowing to be avenged upon him. Something in the young Englishman's nonchalant bearing, together with the cold menace in his eyes, caused them to hesitate as they drew near. And when the *mafoos*—there were eight of them and all with whips—reviled them lustily, told them they were fools, that their brains had been drawn through their ears in infancy, that the escaped man was not the camel rider, but a *mafoo* like themselves and in the employ of the English Legation and well they knew that no Englishman allows his

servants to be molested by such pigs, rats, scorpions as they were, they turned and departed quite tranquilly. There are no people on the face of the globe who can pass from fierce anger to unruffled composure with the unblinking rapidity of the Chinese.

While Bertram again mounted the esplanade the *mafoos* put their heads together and calculated to a nicety how many times the numeral eight divided the numeral five hundred. They did not care a beggar's clap-bowl whether the man was the camel rider or not, nor why the Englishman had helped him escape. The English, they agreed, were a notoriously queer, incomprehensible people and the only definite fact about them was their word. Once given, it could be relied upon like fate or death or the ethics of Confucius.

Up on the wall the other men were rushing to Bertram's assistance, when they saw the mob quietly depart.

"What was the row?" they asked as he joined them.

"Only a poor devil racing for his life," he answered.

"You'll never see your horse again," Prince Pontioff assured him.

"Rather think I will. D'ye see, I know the man—made a mistake about him once and—er, well, I was glad of a chance to help him."

"Is he safe now?" The question leaped from

Betty's quivering lips like a cry. She had watched the race with hands gripped tightly together, paralyzed into complete silence by her terror for Follingsbee. Her voice, which she struggled hard to make steady, sounded strange to her own ears.

Bertram glanced at her with swift scrutiny and his face twitched as if with sudden pain.

"Quite safe," he answered quietly.

She trembled with relief and Bertram managed to divert attention from her by challenging the Prince to wager that his horse would be found in the stables on the morrow.

Soon afterwards the picnickers returned home. When Mr. Danford heard the story of Follingsbee's escape and much else besides from Betty—she sobbed it all out with her head buried in his waistcoat—he exclaimed, "Child! Child! Why have you kept silent all this time? A few words would have explained everything and prevented us from misjudging and discrediting Mr. Follingsbee!"

"Because," sobbed Betty, "because he made me promise not to tell; he was afraid of compromising you with the Chinese Government."

"Good Lord! And we have been treating him more or less like a pariah!" ejaculated the Minister ruefully.

"I didn't!" Betty reminded him proudly, lifting her tear-stained face.

"No," admitted her father with a slow reflective

smile. "Now that I think of it, I believe you didn't.

Follingsbee did not come to the American Legation that night. Instead he wrote Betty a note which brought the roses radiantly to her cheeks.

She slept with the note tucked carefully under her pillow and dreamed of paradise.

The next morning Follingsbee called on Mr. Danford. He remained in the Minister's office upwards of half an hour.

Betty was sure of this because she was watching the timepiece on the drawing-room table. When the round face of the clock—looking for all the world like a lover's full moon—showed three minutes past the half hour, the office door leading into the drawing-room opened and John Follingsbee came in. His face, with its look of quick intelligence, strong will, and calm valour, had new lines carved deep upon it, lines that are modelled on the human countenance not by the great sculptor Time, but by the heart and soul of a man who has achieved his purpose by playing perilously with death the while.

Betty rose at his entrance, then stood still, her cheeks aflame like roses in a June garden, her breath fluttering, her eyes hidden under their dark lashes. Follingsbee came swiftly toward her and caught both her hands in his. Still she did not move or speak.

"Betty!" he cried, in his voice the sharp pain of

sudden doubt. She raised her eyes then that he might see, and for one long lover's moment he held her close.

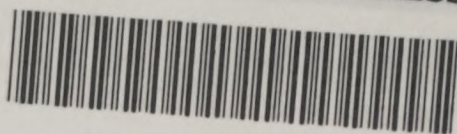
Then Betty slipped like a dream from his arms.

"I am so happy," she said, "that it hurts."

"Let me kiss the hurt, sweetheart," he laughed joyously, and bending his head he kissed her.

THE END

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